

Insights on Quality:

A National Review of Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education

in Ireland 1990 – 2004

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Introduction

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was launched by the Minister for Education and Science in October 2002. It is jointly managed by the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College of Education, Dublin. The aim of the CECDE is to develop and coordinate ECCE in Ireland in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999). The remit of the Centre is comprehensive, focusing on all aspects of ECCE for children aged birth to six years in Ireland, in both informal and formal settings.

Within this context, the CECDE has three core *objectives* (CECDE, 2001):

1. The development of a National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education (NQF/ECCE) is the core function of the CECDE. This involves devising quality standards for all settings in which children aged birth to six years are present. It also involves developing appropriate support mechanisms for personnel working with children, as well as a system of assessment to ensure quality is achieved.
2. The CECDE is currently in the process of implementing three targeted interventions for children who are experiencing disadvantage and who have special needs in the birth to six age-category.
3. The CECDE is preparing the groundwork for the establishment of the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA), as envisaged in the White Paper, *Ready to Learn*.

Three distinct elements can be identified within the core objective of the CECDE, *i.e.* the development of the NQF/ECCE. First of all, it will *define*

what is understood by quality for children in the Irish context. Secondly, a system of inspection or *assessment* will be devised to ensure that quality is attained and maintained. Last of all, an infrastructure will be developed to *support* all those working in the ECCE sector to accomplish quality as prescribed in the standards.

The CECDE has undertaken a *Programme of Work* (CECDE, 2001) in the past two years to ensure that the NQF/ECCE is evidence-based and builds on national and international best policy, practice and research. Within this, four distinct pillars of evidence were identified and researched to underpin the development of the NQF/ECCE, as follows:

- *Questions of Quality* is the report of a national consultation process with stakeholders on all aspects of Defining, Assessing and Supporting quality (CECDE, 2004);
- *Insights on Quality* is a national review of quality in ECCE in Ireland in relation to all aspects of policy, practice and research from 1990 to 2004 (CECDE, 2005a);
- *Making Connections* is a review of international policy, practice and research relating to quality in ECCE across six countries (CECDE, 2005b);
- *Evidence and Perspectives* is a thematic review of current research on child development and learning in Ireland (CECDE, Forthcoming).

This paper presents an overview of the second pillar of research, *Insights on Quality*, which was published in February 2005. It first of all outlines the rationale for the production of the report and how it fits within the CECDE *Programme of Work*. A brief overview of the methodology used is then provided. This is followed by a concise summary of the structure of the report, which outlines the parameters of the research and gives an overview of the literature documented. A particular focus is placed on the implications for the development of the NQF/ECCE in relation to the elements of Defining, Assessing and Supporting quality, which was the primary purpose of producing the review. The paper concludes with a broad overview of the recommendations emanating from the research.

Rationale

A *Programme of Work* was designed for the CECDE, through a partnership of

the Department of Education and Science, the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College of Education (CECDE, 2001). This was further elaborated upon within the CECDE *Research Strategy – A Work in Progress*, which detailed the undertaking of a national review of quality as an integral element of our work (CECDE, 2003a:6). The rationale for the inclusion of a national review was to ensure that the NQF/ECCE was evidence-based and built upon existing national expertise and practice within the sector. This ensures that the rich diversity of good practice in the Irish context is captured and can be shared among all those with an interest in quality practice for our youngest children. In recent years, there has been increasing momentum within the ECCE sector towards the achievement of quality practice, and the harnessing of this rich well of indigenous experience and expertise will be crucial to the development of quality services for our youngest children. Reassuringly, it highlights the commonalities of many of the issues and concerns across the whole sector in the achievement of quality. *Insights on Quality*, while an important publication in its own right, must be viewed for the purposes of the NQF/ECCE as one element of the evidence that has coalesced to inform its development and implementation.

Methodology

The starting point for conducting this national review was the *Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education* (CECDE, 2003b). This Audit identified 1,082 individual pieces of research that had been produced in relation to ECCE in Ireland since 1990 and categorised them under 12 themes. The theme in relation to Quality was one of the smallest, containing just 53 pieces of research. As part of the research process, all 1,082 pieces of research in the Audit were re-analysed. This identified many additional publications, which, while not focused primarily on quality, they addressed the subject in some detail. In addition, the online database of research which the CECDE hosts on its website (www.cecde.ie) was consulted. This has been hosted since 2003, and in addition to the contents of the Audit of Research, it is updated on an ongoing basis as publications come on stream. In this way, research published in late 2003 and early 2004, following the publication of the Audit, was identified.

In addition, a large number of ECCE organisations were contacted regarding policy, practice or research documents they had produced between 1990 and 2004. This exercise proved very valuable and produced

many more important recent publications regarding quality in the Irish context. In total, 66 organisations were contacted by letter, and follow-up phone calls where necessary, including the County Childcare Committees, organisations comprising the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative group¹, government departments and agencies, the health boards and the primary schools inspectorate. This response ensured that our research analysed the most current policy, practice and research available on quality in the Irish context.

Outline and Structure of the Report

In excess of three hundred publications were reviewed for the report. There are three main sections to the report; namely, Policy, Practice and Research. Each of these sections relates to quality in both the formal and informal sector, at national, regional and local levels. In this way, it crosses many of the traditional divides of previous reviews completed, which reviewed either the 'care' or 'education' elements separately. Each section within the review concludes with a set of implications for the development of the NQF/ECCE, categorised under Defining Quality, Assessing Quality and Supporting Quality. These three elements comprise the Defining strand of the NQF/ECCE, while they also provided the theme of the CECDE International Conference held in Dublin Castle in September 2004, *Questions of Quality*.

Each section incorporates literature from statutory agencies/government departments, non-statutory agencies and a number of other organisations or individuals. Within the government departments, a particular focus was placed on the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. The non-statutory organisations were largely comprised of members of the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative. In addition, a number of other organisations such as the Combat Poverty Agency, the National Disability Authority, the Irish National Teachers' Organisation, the Irish Congress of Trade Unions and a number of Partnerships, which had produced publications, were also included. Moreover, a number of individuals who have produced documentation, largely within the research section, feature within the report. A number of international or cross-national reviews, which included Ireland, were incorporated within the policy section.

Implications for the NQF/ECCE

For the purpose of this paper, the implications from the review are listed below. These are categorised under the aforementioned headings of Defining, Assessing and Supporting Quality. A selection of implications that emerged for *Defining Quality* and which impacted on the development of the NQF/ECCE is as follows:

- First of all, quality is a subjective and dynamic concept that is difficult to define and is perceived as a continuous process as opposed to an end product.
- Secondly, there are a number of diverse perspectives (children, parents, providers, policy makers) as to what constitutes quality, all of which the NQF/ECCE must acknowledge and accommodate.
- Placing the needs, abilities and interests of the child at the centre of provision is an inherent characteristic of quality.
- The environment in which the child develops and learns, both indoor and outdoors, is of paramount importance in ensuring quality services.
- Parental partnership and community involvement are important indicators of quality within services and mechanisms to harness this important input must be put in place.
- The levels of training and qualifications of staff are important in attaining and maintaining quality services.
- Lastly, the presence of efficient management and effective leadership makes a significant contribution towards the achievement of quality.

In relation to *Assessing Quality*, the following implications were distilled from the report:

- The complexity of assessing quality, especially the more intangible and dynamic features, must be acknowledged and a mechanism devised to assess all aspects of quality within settings.
- Assessment consists of two aspects, both internal assessment and

external assessment. A combination of these is most valuable in providing a more comprehensive overview of quality within services, as opposed to either individually.

- Any system of evaluation must be holistic and developmental in nature, must recognise positive elements of practice and identify aspects in need of improvement. To this end, it is important that any assessment mechanism provides definite and unambiguous feedback for staff with clear recommendations for future progression.
- Last of all, it is advisable to build any assessment infrastructure on the existing statutory systems in operation within early years settings, namely, the Department of Health and Children preschool inspection system and the inspection system operated by the Department of Education and Science Inspectorate within primary schools.

Finally, a number of implications for *Supporting Quality* from the report emerged, including the following:

- Increased coordination of the ECCE sector is a prerequisite of the rollout of the Framework, which would be enhanced by the establishment of a centralised agency, such as the Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged in the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (DES, 1999).
- Sustained long-term commitment on the part of the State, especially in relation to funding, is essential to the development of quality services.
- The availability of a qualified workforce, with clearly defined support structures and regular opportunities for continuing professional development, is fundamental to the development of quality ECCE services.
- Fourthly, the existence of a comprehensive and cohesive infrastructure at national, regional and local level is a prerequisite of quality services.
- Lastly, the production and dissemination of relevant policy, practice and research developments in the sector assists in building the capacity of the sector towards the delivery of quality services.

Recommendations

Based on these aforementioned sets of implications for Defining, Assessing and Supporting quality, the report concluded with a number of recommendations. A concerted effort was made to distil the most pertinent recommendations from the report rather than produce a long and unwieldy set of recommendations. This helps to ensure that they have more of an impact and are more easily implemented. Eventually, two generic recommendations and six recommendations regarding the development of the NQF/ECCE were produced.

1. The first general recommendation relates to the development of a national strategy to promote ECCE services. This includes adequate and sustainable funding, the inception of a national data strategy to collect current and reliable information at national, regional and local level and mechanisms to support education, training and professional development.
2. Secondly, it was recommended that professional practice be recognised, rewarded and supported with clear pathways of entry, transfer and progression put in place for all practitioners in the sector.

There were six additional recommendations relating specifically to the development of the NQF/ECCE.

1. The report proposes that the Framework must take account of the multiple perspectives on quality that exist in the Irish context. To this end, it needs to be flexible and dynamic to meet the evolving needs of children, families and Irish society.
2. The NQF/ECCE must be child-centred with a focus on children's rights. In this way, it must provide a reference point for the coordination of all other policy, practice and research in the Irish context.
3. It is considered essential that the NQF/ECCE incorporate clearly stated national standards on a number of particular aspects of practice. These include the environment, parental involvement, professional qualifications, the programme or curriculum, resources and materials. Furthermore, these standards should be interpreted by a series of guidelines for practitioners.

4. The NQF/ECCE should include an assessment mechanism which complements and builds upon the existing infrastructure and expertise. Such an assessment framework should offer national accreditation for existing quality improvement/assurance programmes and should promote internal and external assessment processes within settings.
5. In tandem with the assessment framework, a comprehensive range of support mechanisms are proposed to facilitate the implementation of the NQF/ECCE. These include the establishment of networks to provide advice and mentoring for all stakeholders, the provision of multidisciplinary teams to meet the diverse needs of children, families and service providers, the availability of reliable, comprehensive and current data in accessible formats and a wide-ranging programme of initial and continuing professional development for all personnel involved in ECCE.
6. Finally, in order to ensure that the NQF/ECCE promotes the coordination of existing national policy, practice and research, the roll out of the Framework should be the responsibility of a centralised agency, which in turn is supported by a coordinated infrastructure at national, regional and local level.

Conclusion

Three of the four pillars of research have been published, while the fourth, Evidence and Perspectives, will be published in Summer 2005. Concurrently, the development of the NQF/ECCE has been progressed, which is underpinned and informed by this research. This has been achieved within an intense process of consultation with our Consultative Committee, a representative group of fifty stakeholder groups from the broader ECCE sector. The draft NQF/ECCE will be launched in October 2005, followed by a nationwide pilot implementation project. This represents a crucial step in the attainment of quality services for all young children in Ireland.

¹ Members of the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative are: Barnados; Children in Hospital Ireland; Childminding Ireland; Forbairt

Naíonraí Teo; IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation; Irish Steiner Early Childhood Association; National Children's Nurseries Association and St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland.

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Researching Quality in Irish Early Education

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Introduction

Interest in quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) has become evident, both nationally and internationally, in recent years. Within the Irish context developments within ECCE have predominantly related to policy and advocacy, with such becoming increasingly more apparent in the latter half of the 1990s. However, research in the area of early childhood care and education and in particular research pertaining to quality, has not been as evident (Walsh, 2003). As a nation, we are currently obliged to draw on international studies relative to quality early childhood care and education to support and advocate for high standards. The examination of such international literature outlines that benefits or outcomes associated with the provision of good quality early childhood care and education (both immediate in nature, but also in the longer term) include academic, social and economic outcomes.

The assessment of quality standards places an ever-increasing emphasis on the evaluation of both static and dynamic elements of a setting, but also demands the assessment of child outcomes to justify the review. However, determining the indicators of quality (be they dynamic or static in character) is highly dependent on the social norms and values of the society under examination. Research suggests that the classification of indicators of good quality are strongly influenced by the perspectives of all those persons with an interest in early childhood care and education (Moss and Pence, 1994), therefore an Irish definition of quality is dependent on the voice of those with a stake in the Irish early childhood care and education sector.

In 2004, the Centre for Social and Educational Research was commissioned by the Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education to conduct research relating to early childhood care and education, specifically research accessing the multiple perspectives of Irish ECCE stakeholders. The following paper provides an overview of such a project, preceded by a chronological examination of Irish policy and advocacy developments in the area over the past decade. An overview of emergent international research outlining the benefits of good quality