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Executive Summary¹

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is delighted to present this report of our consultation process to the early childhood care and education (ECCE) sector. This publication is a collation of the collective views and experiences of the sector as expressed in our series of consultative seminars in October and November 2003.

The primary focus of the consultative seminars was to gain the insights and perspectives of all stakeholders in the ECCE sector in relation to quality. Consultation is a core value of the CECDE; as is stated in our Programme of Work, *"Consultation with stakeholders will be a crucial part of the process of developing quality standards."* (CECDE, 2001: 4)

The consultative seminars have provided us with key information and insights as we continue on the process of devising a National Framework for Quality (NFQ) for all settings attended by children from birth to six years, including children cared for within the home, by childminders, in preschools, community playgroups, grúpaí naíonraí, Traveller preschools, crèches, nurseries and the infant classes of primary schools.

The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE)

In 2001 the Minister for Education and Science invited the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra to jointly establish the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. The CECDE was launched in October 2002 to develop and co-ordinate Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper *'Ready to Learn'* (DES, 1999).

This remit is comprehensive, focusing on all care and education settings for children from birth to six years of age, bridging many of the traditional divides between education and care and between the early years settings and the formal education system.

Within this context, the **objectives** of the Centre (CECDE, 2001) include:

- To develop a quality framework for early childhood education;
- To develop targeted interventions on a pilot basis for children who are educationally disadvantaged and children with special needs and



¹ The full report of the National Consultation on Quality is accessible on the Centre's website (www.cecde.ie). This includes all research instruments (information template etc.) and an extended presentation of the findings and discussion.

- To prepare the groundwork for the establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency as envisaged by the White Paper.

The core function of the Centre is to produce a **National Framework for Quality (NFQ) for ECCE**.

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.

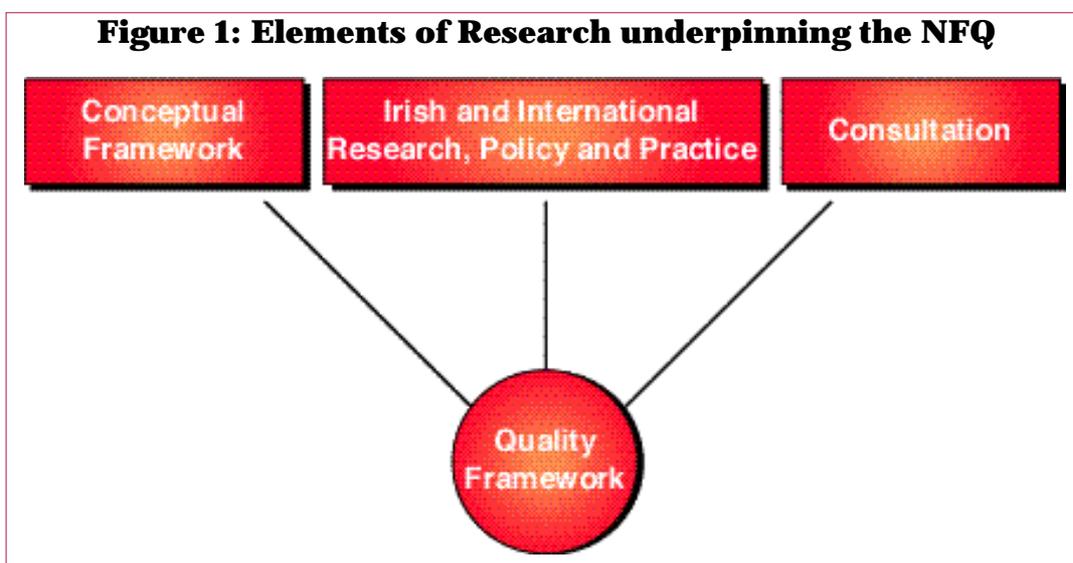
Secondly, a system of inspection or assessment will be devised to ensure that quality is achieved and maintained. Last of all, an infrastructure will be devised and implemented to support all those working in the ECCE sector to accomplish the quality as prescribed in the standards.

strands involved in the devising of the NFQ. ‘A Conceptual Framework on how Young Children Develop and Learn in Ireland’ (CECDE, Forthcoming) is in the final stages of revision. Specific research, focusing on quality in Ireland and in the international context is being conducted and this will distil best policy and practice nationally and internationally in relation to quality. This research, illuminated by the expertise and insights of ECCE practitioners provides a solid foundation on which to build our national quality standards.

Methodology

In progressing work towards a NFQ, the CECDE views consultation as key to harnessing the expertise and experience of all stakeholders in the ECCE sector. To this end, six consultative seminars

Figure 1 below illustrates the



were held in Dublin, Cork, Galway, Athlone, Monaghan and Carraroe. The final seminar was conducted through the medium of Irish while documentation was provided in both English and Irish at all seminars. A research company, Red C Research, was awarded the contract to analyse the data generated by the seminars.

The Centre's databases and personal contacts were utilised to publicise the consultative seminars and draw attention to the web facility. Flyers were distributed to umbrella and representative organisations nationally, to be further disseminated to members. Advertisements were placed on appropriate local radio stations and staff members also gave interviews on news and current affairs programmes. Information on the seminars was placed in a number of pertinent educational magazines. All infant teachers in primary schools in the environs of the last three seminars received a flyer and information on the consultation.

Initially, a finishing date of

December 5th was set for the consultation process, but this was extended until January 5th to allow more stakeholders to participate by using the website and posting back the information templates that were distributed.

A facility was established on the Centre's website (<http://www.cecde.ie>) to allow stakeholders who were not able to attend the seminars to complete and submit the information template on-line. Additionally, information templates devised to gather the data during consultations were distributed to members of our Consultative Committee² to be completed by members of the organisations they represented and returned by post. Students in the final year of the BA in Early Childhood Care and Education in the Dublin Institute of Technology also participated in the research.

We chose a process of collaborative/participatory research in relation to the consultation process for a number of reasons.

² As part of its commitment to consultation, the CECDE formed a Consultative Committee in 2003 to advise and guide it in its work. At present, the committee is comprised of 48 stakeholders in the early childhood care and education sector.

Firstly, the completion of the information templates by participants over a period of time, while engaged in stimulating and active dialogue produced a wealth of research data for the CECDE and is invaluable for us as source material in formulating a quality framework.

Secondly, this mode of research enriches the participant as well as yielding high quality information. Delegates at the seminar are afforded the opportunity to engage in dialogue within groups, composed of people from diverse backgrounds. This afforded discourse and the sharing of expertise across various professions, disciplines and backgrounds.

Thirdly, feedback sessions at the end of the seminars allowed the issues raised within groups to be verbalised to the wider audience, and the commonality of many of the issues and concerns to be realised. The seminars also provided a forum for networking and profile raising of the many stakeholder organisations within the sector, many not having the opportunity to come together regularly to discuss

issues of common concern.

Each seminar was conducted in the evening to facilitate participants unavailable during the day due to work or family commitments.

Refreshments were served during the registration process and this time afforded an opportunity for networking and sharing among participants. Participants were purposefully assigned to mixed groups (delegates from different professional backgrounds) to enhance the discourse.

The seminars then opened with two brief presentations; the first relating to the origins and progress of the CECDE and the second describing the rationale and format of the evening. Delegates then moved into their pre-assigned discussion groups; each with a briefed facilitator to ensure all participants had an opportunity to voice their perspectives.

Information templates were distributed and the discussion was preceded by the completion of background/demographic data.

After initial introductions the group discussion focused on three main questions:

1. What does the term **‘quality’** in early childhood care and education mean to you?
2. In your opinion, what are the most effective ways of **assessing quality** in early childhood care and education?
3. What **supports** do you need to receive in order to achieve and maintain quality in early childhood care and education?

Approximately twenty minutes per question was allocated and participants recorded their thoughts and insights on the information template during this time and in the time allotted at the end of the discussion session. The facilitator for each group then provided feedback to the whole audience, highlighting the important issues raised within their respective groups. The seminar concluded with participants completing an evaluation on the consultative seminar as a whole, providing valuable information for the CECDE in the planning of future consultations. The information

templates gathered as a result of the consultative seminars were coded and analysed by Red C Research.

We are grateful to all participants, from a diverse array of backgrounds and interests who took the time to share their expertise and insights with us. All participants have contributed to the devising of the NFQ for all ECCE settings in Ireland in relation to a vast array of themes, including training and qualifications, parental involvement, equipment and materials, curriculum and methodology. The CECDE is committed to ongoing consultation with the sector as the framework produced and piloted.

Findings

The results of the analysis of the information template are not cumulative in nature due to the fact that participants were encouraged to give multiple responses under each question. The findings foreground the actual voices of participants in the consultation process to reinforce their ownership of this information. Where possible therefore the findings have been illustrated with actual quotations from the participants’ feedback.



Profile of Participants

A total of 387 delegates participated in the consultative seminars. There was a great diversity of people in attendance. The majority of participants were female (95%) while a good provincial and urban: rural balance (56%: 40%) was achieved. The greatest attendance was in the urban areas of Dublin (26%), Cork (18%) and Galway (15%) (Galway City and Carraroe), while 11% of the respondents completed the information template online.

Delegates included practitioners/teachers (43%), students (29%), parents/guardians (28%), adult educators (15%) and policy developers (11%). Consequently, these delegates represented an extensive array of settings and contexts for ECCE. The pedagogical approach/philosophy utilised by the greatest proportion of participants was the Montessori method (20%), followed by a play-based curriculum (17%) and High Scope (15%). In addition, 29% of respondents did not state a pedagogical approach/philosophy. Many participants commented on the value of the seminars in terms of listening and sharing experiences

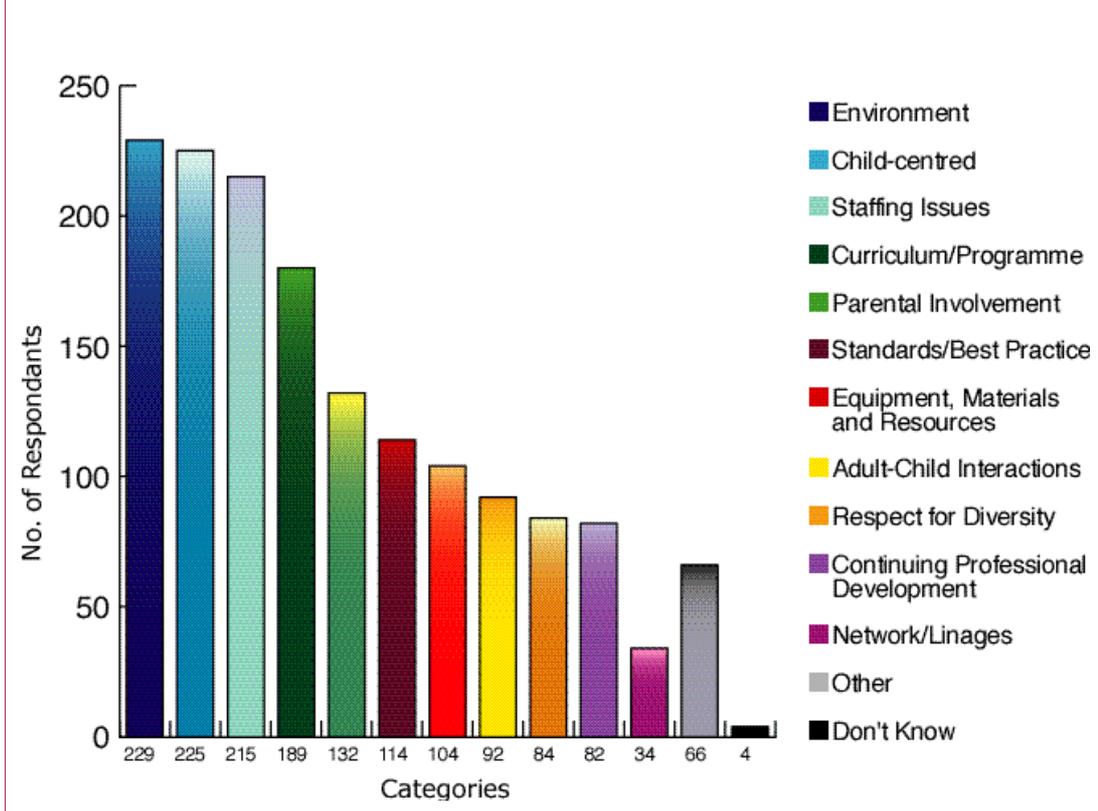
and perspectives with others from diverse backgrounds, often for the first time. This greatly enriched the feedback on the information templates and it was encouraging to note the levels of agreement and the commonalities on many of the core issues.

1. Defining Quality

In the area of defining quality, a wide variety of responses was forthcoming, highlighting the complexity of outlining the meaning of quality in the Irish context.

The **Environment** of the child was the primary response, highlighted by 66% of all delegates. This includes a number of elements in the immediate environment, relating to both static and dynamic variables. Many respondents cited the provision of a safe, clean and warm space for the child. The advantages of an outdoor play space and of a suitable atmosphere were also commonly cited by delegates.

"Quality is also in this instance, about providing an environment that complements and supports the home, safety yes, but important that there are opportunities for risk - not sanitised."

Figure 2: Defining Quality

The second most common element of consensus in defining quality among respondents related to the service being **Child-centred** (65%). This relates to the recognition and the valuing of each child as an individual and the need to work towards the realisation of these needs. The development of all aspects of the child, including the physical, intellectual, emotional and social elements was emphasised as being of paramount importance.

"Daily experience of the child feeling they belong, they are valued, and they are supported in their interests."

Staffing Issues accounted for 62% of responses. This relates to the training and qualifications of staff working with children at all levels. The characteristics of staff were seen as being of pivotal importance in the care and education of children.

"Cáilíochtaí cú i gcúram leanaí a bheith ag na Stiúrthóirí."

The **Curriculum or Programme** in use featured prominently within the responses, cited by 55% of delegates. This includes the use of defined routines, structure and methodologies used within the setting, which evolve according to the changing individual needs and capabilities of children.

"Services should be clear on their goals and objectives and methods of educating and should have written assessments regularly of these."

Parental Involvement was raised as an aspect of defining quality by 38% of respondents. This involved accommodating the needs of families through real and consistent partnership.

"Parents are the child's first educators and that the child's development is best supported when service providers work closely with parents."

The issue of **Standards and Best Practice** was cited by 33% of delegates, including the development of philosophies, policies, procedures and record keeping in relation to all aspects of

the setting. This also involves their implementation, review and development on an ongoing basis.

"Any services that purports to be a quality service must demonstrate evidence of and an articulation of the values governing the service."

The provision of **Equipment, Materials and Resources** apposite to the needs of each child featured in the responses of 30% of participants. This relates to all aspects of the setting, from the appropriate structure and layout of the building to the range of resources available to the developing child.

"Providing a high quality environment with equipment, materials, activities and interactions appropriate to their age and stage of development."

Adult-Child Interactions were noted as being central to the definition of quality by 27% of respondents. This involves affording individual time to each child for listening, supporting and interaction, which can be both adult and child-led.

"Quality: is the relationship between child and adult."

Respect for Diversity was forwarded as an element in the definition of quality by 24% of respondents. This was an inclusive concept, not only including race, ethnic, linguistic and religious elements but also comprising a respect for all children and their families regardless of circumstances.

"Quality early childhood care and education is possible where diversity is acknowledged, affirmed and respected and where children are treated individually rather than the same and not excluded or disadvantaged on any ground."

The prerequisite of **Continuing Professional Development** in ensuring quality was cited by 24% of respondents. This involved access to a variety of courses, workshops and training opportunities for personnel with all levels of qualifications and in all aspects of ECCE.

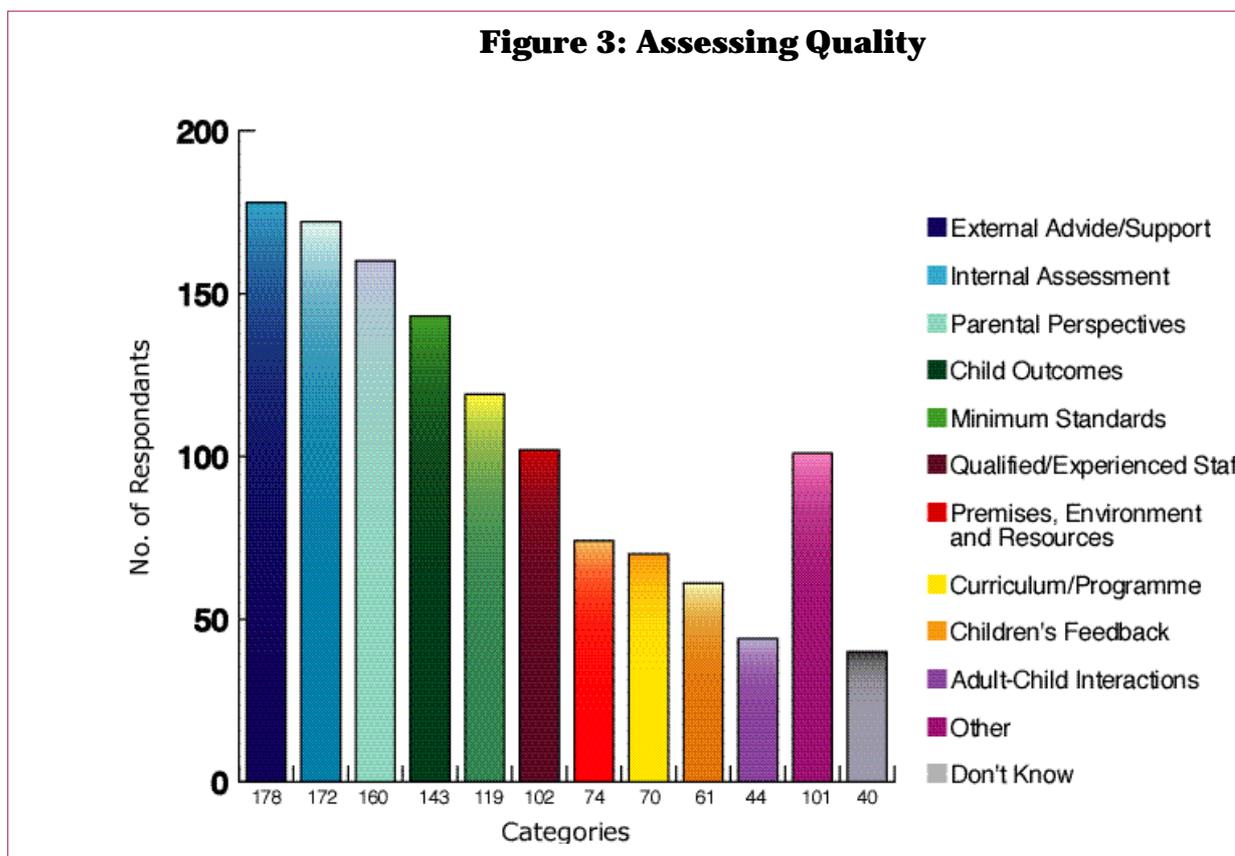
"Quality is about how staff receive in-service to extend and expand their skills and their own learning. How staff are supported."

A total of 10% of respondents noted the building of **Networks and Linkages** as important in ensuring a quality service. This was in order to facilitate the sharing and dissemination of information at both local and national levels.

"Policy & procedures in place thru consultation and sharing of best practice."

The other category (19%) is largely comprised of responses that did not relate specifically to the question of defining quality but related largely to local concerns about the development of ECCE (e.g. planning or funding difficulties). Only 1% of delegates failed to respond to this question.





2. Assessing Quality

Regarding the assessment of quality, thematic analysis revealed the ten categories represented in Figure 3 above.

The largest number of respondents (46%) focused on **External Advice and Support** in relation to the assessment of quality. This category includes the existing preschool inspections in operation, but there was a focus on the support as opposed to the inspection element of such services. There was great emphasis placed on the suitability of the personnel

supplying the external supports, with wide experience and qualifications in the ECCE sector emerging as being important characteristics. Another prominent characteristic of responses was the call for the inspectors to look beyond the physical environment and to focus on the quality of the care and education also.

"Tábhachtach go mbeadh saineolaithe a thuigfidh forbairt an pháiste agus iad cáilithe dá réir."

Internal Assessment was cited by 44% of delegates. This relates to

regular ongoing assessment and self-evaluation within services. This involved the discussion, planning and evaluation of assessment in a cycle of reflective practice among all members of staff. Participants noted the time needed to implement this form of assessment and the necessity to develop self-evaluation tools within settings.

"Assisting practitioners to self-assess by discussion, planning, evaluation and re-planning - a cycle of reflective practice."

Stakeholders viewpoints, in particular **Parental Perspectives** of a service, was noted by 41% of respondents as an important method of assessment. Delegates cited the willingness of parents to use the service and their satisfaction with their child's happiness in the service as important indicators of quality. In addition, it was suggested that parents could be asked to complete evaluation forms regarding the service from which alterations and modification might be made.

"I feel the most effective way of assessing quality is the feedback we have every year from parents. If you offer a service where parents are happy and their child is happy and content then word will spread of the great service available."

Child Outcomes were mentioned as a form of assessment by 37% of delegates in the process of conducting the seminars. This involves regular assessment and evaluation of the development of each child, which is documented and recorded on an ongoing basis. This relates to all aspects of the development of the child, including physical, social, linguistic, cognitive and emotional aspects.

"Children differ in terms of abilities, cultures, life experiences and learning styles. Knowledge of and sensitivity to difference and individual interests on the part of practitioners is essential for quality care."

The use of **Minimum Standards** was noted by 31% of respondents as important in the assessment of quality. Such documents could be recognised or even created nationally based on best practice

and be reviewed periodically. Within settings, checklists would be completed regularly for all children, which would document the quality of the service provided. This category also comprises the policies of the setting in a variety of aspects, such as enrolments, diversity and health and safety.

"Have policies on quality, so everyone knows what is expected and what they are required to provide."

The issue of **Qualified and Experienced Staff** was cited by 26% of delegates. In addition to access to initial training and qualifications, this includes the provision of regular and continuous professional development through in-service courses. The quality of the staff was asserted as being of primary importance, by virtue of the interactions with children on a daily basis. The need for standardised training across the sector was also prominent, leading to the creation of a career path and promotional ladder.

"In order to assess quality in ECCE are needs to look at the links between quality in provision of services and quality in provision of training."

The **Premises, Environment and Resources** were viewed as being important in assessing quality by 19% of participants. This includes the physical suitability of the premises and layout as well as the atmosphere created within, ensuring it was warm, safe and stress free. The provision of space, both indoors and outdoors for play and other activities also featured prominently. The equipment, furniture, facilities and resources (such as play materials, books etc.) in use within the setting were seen as being of primary importance and their accessibility, relevance and suitability to the age and stage of the children present was highlighted.

"The Atmosphere. Hear the Children. The Environment - Bright and airy, free space, child sized, natural materials, specific areas, safe."

A total of 18% of delegates cited the **Curriculum and Programme** in operation within settings as being of importance in the assessment of quality. This involves articulating the routines and methods used within the setting and their appropriateness for the children present. Many respondents were insistent that flexibility must be an

inherent characteristic of the curriculum or programme in the early years.

This involves the language used, the level of eye-to-eye contact and the listening ability of the staff.

"Observation would be the most effective way of assessing quality. Observations between staff and children, staff and staff, staff and parents."

The perspectives of children in the form of **Children's Feedback** were noted by 16% of respondents. This involves listening to children's experiences of their time within settings and using this as a tool to assess quality. In addition, this can be monitored in the willingness of the children to return each day and by observation of their happiness within the setting.

Within this question, 101 (26%) responses were classified as **Other**. A total of 40 (10%) delegates did not reply to this question.

3. Supporting Quality

In relation to supporting quality, participants proposed a number of aids/ assistance to ensure that quality in ECCE is achieved and maintained. A process of thematic analysis revealed the following categories as illustrated in Figure 4.

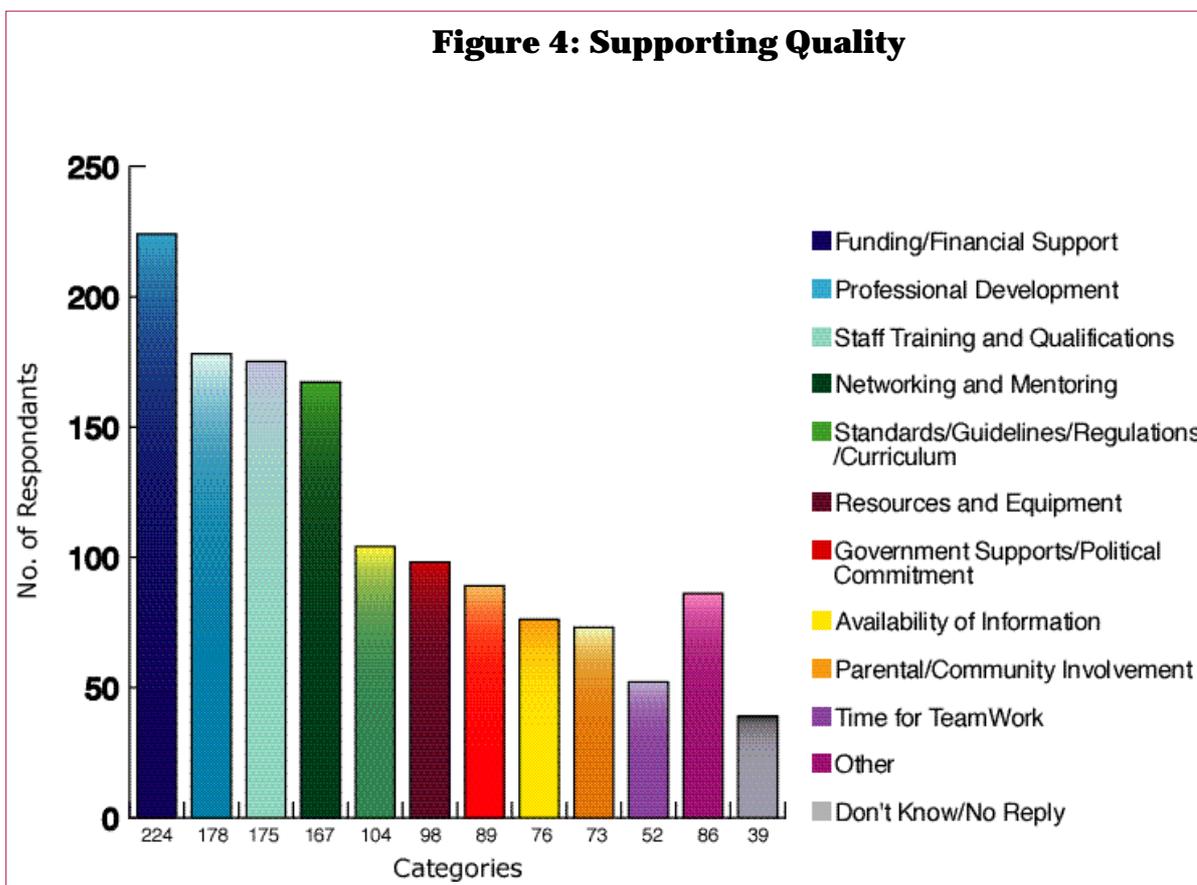


"You can assess quality by asking children how they feel while in the service. One can also see if the child is happy being left there. Babies can be assessed by observations done at various times throughout the day."

The main support cited by respondents at the consultative seminars regarding quality was **Funding and Financial Support**, mentioned by 58% of delegates. Respondents proposed a number of ways in which this could be facilitated, including direct funding for childcare, capital grants, capitation grants, tax breaks and tax credits for parents.

Adult-Child Interactions were viewed as being central to the assessment of quality by 11% of participants. This comprised all interactions within the setting, including that between adults and children and also child-child interactions as promoted by adults.

Figure 4: Supporting Quality



"High quality provision will not come cheap. Support will have to be put in place. The emphasis should be on improvement rather than grading and competition which in my view is counter productive."

Professional Development was proposed as a support by 46% of respondents. This involved the access to ongoing training and development for practitioners, which dovetailed with their work and personal commitments. This involved release time from work as

well as the provision of modular or part-time courses.

"Everybody needs ongoing in-service training to examine and explore on an ongoing basis all areas involved in childcare and education."

Closely related to the theme of Professional Development, and cited by 45% of delegates, was the issue of **Staff Training and Qualifications**. This comprised access to training opportunities for

staff at pre-service level and the provision of courses leading to accredited and standardised qualifications. Such a training infrastructure would permit a career path to be created, attracting and retaining young practitioners and strengthening the emerging identity of the sector.

"If staff have had appropriate training children are more likely to get quality experiences and further their development."

The provision of **Networking and Mentoring** was viewed by 43% of respondents as an important element in supporting quality. This involved the sharing and dissemination of information among organisations at a local and national level. In addition, this networking was proposed to cross the traditional professional and sectoral divides, to include all the stakeholders in ECCE.

"Visits should be from people with a background in child development in childcare rep locally who has knowledge of individual providers and their setting who would help with grant forms."

The presence of **Standards, Guidelines, Regulations and a Curriculum** was seen as an important constituent of a support structure for quality by 27% of delegates. These would help to clearly articulate within the setting what the minimum standards were and the delineation of a curriculum or programme within the setting. There was also prominent calls for the harmonisation of the sector, whereby the same rules and standards would apply to all settings where children from birth to six were present.

"A clear, concise outline of the quality requirements to be given to all services so every service is on an equal footing."

Resources and Equipment (25%) would help to ensure that the physical environment was educationally and aesthetically stimulating and that each child had age and stage appropriate equipment and resources.

"Postéirí trí Gaeilge ag plé ábhar le haghaidh réamhscolaíocht."



The presence of **Government Supports and Political Commitment** in ECCE (23%) related to an acknowledgement of the importance of the early years in government policy and practice and a consequential improvement in the allocations and priority afforded to it. Moreover, there were calls for the implementation of the policies already devised or ratified by the government. In addition, delegates were anxious to see greater coordination between government departments and organisations dealing with ECCE.

"A political and national will to care about what children experience in services."

Availability of Information was listed as a core support by 20% of respondents. This included a directory of services and a telephone help line to provide and disseminate information on all aspects of quality for all stakeholders. This would also comprise the raising of the ECCE profile nationally, through seminars, conferences and public relations. Delegates attending the seminar in Carraroe noted the need for the availability of such advice and support to be readily available in the Irish language.

"Tacaíocht ó thaobh teanga – na séirbhísí ar fad a bhaineann le naíonraí a bheith ar fáil trí Ghaeilge, mar shampla, téiripe cainte, daoine ón mBord Sláinte srl."

A total of 19% of delegates believed that **Parental and Community Involvement** was an essential support in achieving and maintaining quality in ECCE settings. To facilitate this, respondents held that parents would need to be supported to actively participate in this role.

"Parents and families need to be appreciated and their opinions taken into account."

The provision of **Time for Teamwork** within ECCE settings was prioritised by 13% of respondents. This time would be inbuilt in the workday to facilitate planning, discussion and observations with the team. In addition, such time would assist wider networking and linkages with other settings and organisations in the locality.

"Need constant meetings in settings to ensure all workers are striving to the same high quality and standards."

There were 22% of the responses categorised as **Other**. A total of 10% of delegates made no response to this question.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The consultation on questions of quality in ECCE revealed that there is a valuable pool of experience and expertise which can support and inform the development of the NFQ. Participants in the seminars were articulate, informed and constructive in their comments and expressed a general welcome for the need for and development of a NFQ.

Synthesis of responses under the three main questions of quality reveals a number of core elements of quality under which development activities should be focused. This secondary analysis resulted in a number of cross-cutting themes. These are presented below with specific recommendations for the development of the NFQ. These elements are not ordered hierarchically. They are interrelated and interdependent and must each be accorded equal attention.

1. Perspectives on Quality

It is evident from analysis of the feedback templates that a broad

range of opinions, views and advice was shared in this consultation process. This breadth and depth of perspective is a valuable asset to early childhood care and education in Ireland and should not be lost in the process of developing and implementing the NFQ.

Quality in ECCE in Ireland exists within a huge diversity of perspectives, philosophies and practices, which are also dynamic and evolving. This necessitates that quality indicators or standards must contain sufficient flexibility to accommodate these characteristics.

2. Environment

The majority of responses under this heading refer to the immediate environment where the child is present. Comments encompass the physical spaces in terms of space, layout, design, comfort, safety, and hygiene, indoor and outdoor. It was agreed that the environment should be aesthetically pleasing, welcoming, and balance the need for safety and hygiene with the opportunity for children to experience 'safe risk' in support their optimal development.



A clear set of minimum standards relating to the nature of the environment in ECCE settings should be developed to apply to all situations where children (birth-6) are present. They should be firmly grounded in research and best practice in relation to child development, encompass all current and relevant legislation and guidelines and embrace existing best practice as exemplified in established quality assurance programmes in ECCE.

3. Child-centred

This heading refers to the strong consensus that the best interests of the child must inform all policies and practice in ECCE. Participants clearly endorsed the need to consult with and listen to children's views when developing policies and services directly related to them. In light of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

The NFQ must support the well-being and development of all the children (birth-6) of Ireland. This child centred focus must inform all elements of the NFQ including standards, assessment and support structures.

Mechanisms and protocols must be developed to facilitate the voices of children to be heard on all aspects of the development, delivery and assessment of quality in ECCE. Guidelines for consulting with young children should also be inherent to the NFQ.

4. Staffing

This heading refers primarily to the staffing issues in centre based ECCE settings. It includes:

- Concerns regarding the need for adequate ratios of staff to children in order to facilitate the optimal levels of support and interaction for children and also to facilitate essential activities such as child observation, record keeping, supervising students, engaging with parents etc;
- The need for managerial staff with appropriate management qualifications and expertise;
- The need for allocation of time and resources to teamwork/team building and networking and liaison with other professionals and agencies. This time should be within usual working hours.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

The NFQ should give clear guidelines on adult-child ratios based on research evidence and best practice. It should also provide guidelines for practitioners in centre-based settings on supporting essential activities such as teamwork, team building and reflective practice.

5. Education, Training and Qualifications

This heading reflects a wide range of consensus amongst participants including:

- The positive relationship between quality of provision in ECCE and the qualifications of staff;
- The need for standardised and accredited education, training and qualifications, both pre-service and in-service;
- The need for infrastructure to afford all practitioners access to accredited education, training and qualifications wherever and whenever they require it;
- The importance of continuing professional development and need for specific training

programmes related to changing nature of ECCE practice e.g. diversity, special needs, quality assurance.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

The NFQ must articulate the important relationship between quality of ECCE and the qualifications of practitioners. It must articulate well with and support developments regarding standard setting for qualifications, mechanisms for access, transfer and progression and quality assurance procedures currently being undertaken by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, the National Awarding bodies and all institutions involved in the development and delivery of education and training in ECCE.

It must make provision for education and training associated with the implementation of the NFQ.

6. Parental Involvement

This heading refers, in the main, to



the necessity for the NFQ to recognise parents as the primary carers and educators of the child. There was a strong consensus on the necessity of parental involvement in ECCE. Perspectives on this involvement varied along a continuum from asking parents to give satisfaction ratings to services, through to full partnership in the day-to-day operation, management and development of services. It was agreed that facilitating parental involvement was often difficult to achieve and that the NFQ must be able to support and develop this important dimension of quality.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendation is made:

The NFQ should support the development of infrastructure to facilitate the representation of parents' perspectives in the development of policy and practice in ECCE. In addition it should provide guidelines for practitioners regarding supporting and developing parental involvement in service provision.

7. Curriculum/Programme

As is evident from the heading a number of different terms were used by participants to refer to the

need for some sort of overarching national guidelines in relation to everyday practice in ECCE settings with children aged birth to six years. It was agreed that such guidance needed to have a high degree of flexibility to take account of children's needs, support the autonomy of practitioners and accommodate the broad range of existing curricula, programmes and methodologies that exist in ECCE in Ireland.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendation is made:

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is presently engaged in the development of 'Towards a Framework for early Learning.' This initiative will provide overarching curriculum guidelines for all adults working with children birth to six years and may resolve concerns expressed by participants in this consultation. The NFQ should support the development and dissemination of this initiative.

8. Standards

It was clearly acknowledged that standards were an essential element of the development of quality in

ECCE. The role and nature of such standards attracted the following consensus:

- They should support the harmonisation of existing regulations, standards and guidelines;
- They should be applicable to all settings where children aged birth to six are present and be flexible enough to have relevance to a wide variety of practice;
- They should be based on a clear set of values and principles, which should emerge from the consensus of stakeholders in ECCE;
- Implementation materials should be developed that are easy to administer and facilitate regular review of practice.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendation is made:

Clear, standardised guidelines in relation to the development of policies, procedures and practice in a wide variety of ECCE settings should be included in the NFQ. In addition any assessment materials developed should be uncomplicated, straightforward and easy to complete.

9. Adult-Child Interactions

This heading refers to the consensus that emerged regarding the critical importance of positive adult child interaction in the development of quality in ECCE. It also highlights skilled and purposeful child observation as a key tool for the development of such positive interaction.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

The NFQ should take account of the literature regarding the role of adult child interaction in the development and provision of quality in ECCE.

Observation is a valuable tool in the assessment of quality in adult child interactions and the NFQ should include clear guidelines and policies on this important issue.

10. Respect for Diversity

This heading refers to the significant consensus that ECCE provision must be guided by a fundamental respect for diversity in society. This loosely translates into two key perspectives. The first is that all children and families must be treated with respect regardless of



their circumstances. Secondly, that the recognition of the individuality of children should result in policy and practice that avoids uniformity and instead supports difference.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendation is made:

Respect for diversity is a key issue, which must be central to the development of the NFQ. A review of literature and best practice on this issue should underpin this development process.

11. Networking, Linkages and Information

This heading refers to the consensus that emerged regarding the necessity for the establishment of networks at local, regional and national level, which would facilitate the sharing of information and best practice amongst ECCE practitioners. It was emphasised that these networks should build upon established infrastructure and a number of practical suggestions related to the nature of a networking infrastructure were made, including a national clearinghouse for research and information, mentoring systems for practitioners at all levels, discussion groups and telephone help lines. A separate theme emerged out of this

heading related to the need for promotion and profile raising of ECCE itself within society in general.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendation is made:

The NFQ should facilitate the development of infrastructure to support networking and meet the information needs of the broad range of stakeholders in ECCE. This should build upon existing infrastructure and expertise and should be accessible at national, regional and local level.

12. Assessment

This heading refers to the consensus regarding assessment mechanisms in ECCE. It is divided under two clear sections that of external and internal assessment. External assessment referred primarily to existing inspection systems that operate within ECCE. Comments stated the need for:

- Inspectors and assessors qualified in ECCE;
- Formative and supportive assessment;
- Consideration of the more dynamic variables of quality;

- Standardisation, coordination and consistency of external inspection.

Internal assessment can be conceptualised as a continuum from the individual practitioner through to the team within a centre and ultimately to the wider community of practice involved in ECCE. It generally involves review and reflection on practice towards the development and improvement of same. It was viewed as essential to the development of quality. On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

The NFQ must take account of the variety of established approaches to the assessment of quality and be able to accommodate, support and where necessary develop current practice to achieve the desired levels of consistency and co-ordination.

Assessment of quality must have relevance and involve all stakeholders in the provision of ECCE. The NFQ must acknowledge and support the importance of internal assessment at all points along this continuum.

13. Government Support, Commitment and Funding

This heading reflects the unequivocal consensus that quality in ECCE is only achievable if strong Government support is present. This support can be realised by clear and coordinated policy across all Departments. Financial support emerged as a major issue for participants and it was widely viewed that exchequer support for ECCE was essential for the sustainability of growth and development. Funding was identified as necessary under a variety of different headings including, development for infrastructure, capital investment in service provision, adequate terms and conditions of employment for staff and support for parental choice of ECCE.

On the basis of this consensus the following recommendations are made:

Government support for ECCE in Ireland must be clearly evidenced by the publication of strategic, coordinated policy and adequate allocation of financial support to realise and sustain these policy commitments.



Conclusion

The premise upon which this consultation process was conducted was that the formation of the National Framework for Quality should be based upon wide ranging consultation with all stakeholders in early childhood care and education in Ireland. The CECDE would like to reiterate its appreciation to all those who participated in the consultative process and who consequently have played an integral role in the development of the NFQ.

The wealth of data generated during the consultative seminars outlined in this report provides invaluable insights from a diverse array of stakeholders. This complements other elements of the CECDE's work in developing the NFQ, such as the Conceptual Framework and the review of national and international best policy and practice.

It is now envisaged that these elements will be amalgamated and synthesised to produce the core elements of the NFQ, i.e. a set of national quality standards, and mechanisms for implementing and supporting achievement of these standards in early childhood care and education in Ireland.

The CECDE is committed to ongoing consultation in the development of the NFQ and we look forward to further collaboration and partnership with the sector in the process of developing and implementing the NFQ.



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Notes