



Funded by the Irish Government and part financed by the European Union under the National Development Plan
2000-2006



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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ISBN: 0954581555

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& Education

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Printed by Print Bureau.

Irish Translation by: DCU LS.

Foreword



In Ireland, and internationally, the critical importance of children's early years in preparing them to achieve their full potential in their personal, social and working lives has been well documented. In recognition of this, my Department established the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education in 2002. One of the main functions of the centre is to develop a national framework for quality standards that will be applicable to all settings that provide for children from birth to six years of age. The framework will support the development and delivery of high quality early education experiences that will give our children the best possible start in their lifelong journeys of learning and personal fulfilment.

To have relevance for all those committed to the provision of quality in early childhood care and education, it is recognised that the national framework for quality must be built on solid foundations of research and consultation. It must promote coordination and cohesion across the diverse policy and practice domains that characterise existing early childhood care and education provision. It must also be flexible enough to accommodate the richness of experience and expertise that currently underpins the quest for quality in our early years' settings in Ireland.

This publication of this document, *Insights on Quality: A National Review of Policy Practice and Research relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990 - 2004*, is a key step in the development of the quality framework. A holistic vision of early childhood care and education is adopted in the review. Policy, practice and research, emanating from both the formal and informal sectors that provide services for children from birth to six years of age, have been drawn upon to give the most comprehensive picture possible.

The wealth of documentation analysed in the course of this review is testimony to the vibrancy of the early childhood care and education sector and to the excellent work that is currently taking place across the variety of settings that cater for very young children nationwide. The cooperation and generosity of the multiple stakeholders in the sector is particularly noteworthy. Their involvement has been vitally important in ensuring that the research is inclusive and representative. In this regard, I thank everyone who made a contribution to this work.

This review will be a valuable resource for all who are committed to providing quality early experiences for young children. It will ensure that the future development of early childhood care and education will build on the wisdom of our past and current experiences. Its publication is a milestone on the road to the highest possible quality of standards in the care and education of our youngest members of society.

Finally, I congratulate the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education for producing this insightful and wide-ranging report on quality in early childhood care and education in Ireland.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mary Hanafin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Mary Hanafin, TD
Minister for Education and Science

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Acronyms

ADM	Area Development Management	ICTU	Irish Congress of Trade Unions
BCCN	Border Counties Childcare Network	INTO	Irish National Teachers' Organisation
BMW	Border, Midland and Western Region	KCCC	Kildare County Childcare Committee
CCC	County Childcare Committee	NAEYC	National Association for the Education of Young Children
CEA	Centre of Excellence Award	NAPS	National Anti-Poverty Strategy
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education	NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
CHI	Children in Hospital Ireland	NCCC	National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee
CPA	Combat Poverty Agency	NCNA	National Children's Nurseries Association
CPI	Community Playgroup Initiative	NCO	National Children's Office
CSO	Central Statistics Office	N.D.	No Date
DES	Department of Education and Science	NDA	National Disability Authority
DHC	Department of Health and Children	NDP	National Development Plan
DELG	Department of the Environment and Local Government	NDP/CSF	National Development Plan/Community Support Framework
DELR	Department of Equality and Law Reform	NESC	National Economic and Social Council
DIT	Dublin Institute of Technology	NFQ	National Framework for Quality
DJELR	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform	NOW	New Opportunities for Women
DoE	Department of Education	NVCO	National Voluntary Childcare Organisations
DoH	Department of Health	OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
DSCFA	Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs	QE	Quality in Education
DSFA	Department of Social and Family Affairs	QIP	Quality Improvement Programme
DSW	Department of Social Welfare	SEP	Self-Evaluation Profile
EACH	European Association of Children in Hospital	SESE	Social, Environmental and Scientific Education
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education	SNMSI	St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland
ECEA	Early Childhood Education Agency	SPHE	Social, Personal and Health Education
ECERS	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale	SWAHB	South Western Area Health Board
EEL	Effective Early Learning	UK	United Kingdom
EOCP	Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme	UN	United Nations
ERC	Educational Research Centre	WHB	Western Health Board
FÁS	Foras Áiseanna Saothair	WSE	Whole School Evaluation
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison Scheme		

Acknowledgements

The CECDE wishes to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of all those who provided literature for this review. The extent of the bibliography testifies to their efforts in this regard and also evidences the significant endeavours that are being made towards understanding and achieving quality in early childhood care and education (ECCE) in Ireland.

Without the cooperation and generosity of those many individuals and organisations at national, regional and local level, we would not have been in a position to produce such a comprehensive overview of policy, practice and research pertaining to quality in ECCE.

We look forward to future dialogue and discussion on this important issue as we proceed towards the development of the National Framework for Quality.

Section 1

Introduction

It is with great pleasure that the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) presents this report on quality in early childhood care and education (ECCE) to the sector. This publication marks the culmination of an extensive literature review pertaining to the theme of quality in ECCE in Ireland from 1990 to the present day. It is heartening that there is sustained and continuing interest in the topic of quality in ECCE in Ireland. This national review focuses on the issue of quality from three distinct, yet interrelated aspects, namely:

- Policy
- Practice
- Research

This review would not have been possible without the cooperation of a wide range of organizations and individuals at national, regional and local level. The CECDE is grateful to all those who gave of their time and expertise in the collation of this report.

1.1 The Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE)

In 2001, the Minister for Education and Science asked the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra to jointly establish the CECDE. The Centre was launched in October 2002 to develop and co-ordinate ECCE in pursuance of the objectives of the White Paper '*Ready to Learn*' (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999a). The remit of the Centre is comprehensive, focusing on all aspects of ECCE for children birth to six years of age, bridging many of the traditional divides between education and care and between early years settings and the formal education system.

Introduction

Within this context, the **objectives** of the CECDE are as follows:

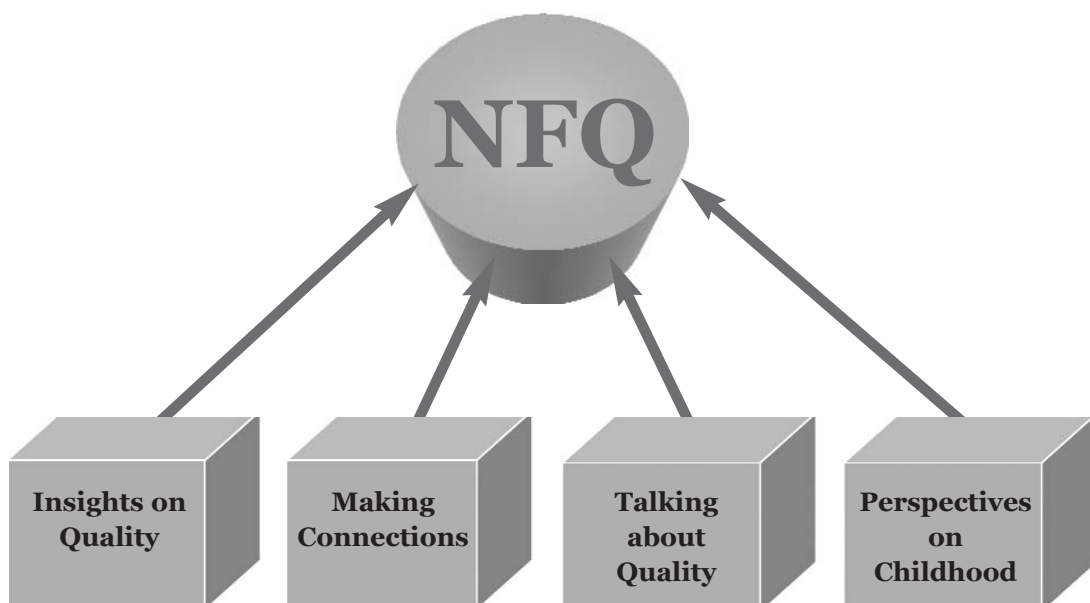
1. The development of a National Framework for Quality (NFQ) is the core function of the CECDE. This involves devising quality standards for all settings in which children aged birth to six are present. It also involves developing appropriate support mechanisms for personnel working with children as well as a system of assessment to ensure quality is achieved and maintained.
2. The CECDE is currently in the process of implementing proposals for targeted interventions for children who are disadvantaged and who have special needs in the birth to six age-category for the DES.
3. One of the objectives of the CECDE is to prepare the groundwork for the establishment of the Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) as envisaged in the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (CECDE, 2001).

Thus, the core objective of the Centre is to

produce a **National Framework for Quality (NFQ)**. Within the NFQ, three distinct elements can be identified. First of all, the 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.

The CECDE has also completed a number of additional research projects that feed directly into the devising of the NFQ. A series of consultative seminars were conducted in 2003 and a report, *Talking About Quality*, has been published (CECDE, 2004b). *Perspectives on Quality* (CECDE, Forthcoming A) outlines the CECDE's understanding of early childhood development, and is in the final stages of revision. In addition, *Making Connections, A Review of International Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education* has been completed and will be published later this year (CECDE, Forthcoming B).

Figure 1: Elements of Research underpinning the NFQ



Introduction

1.2 Section Summaries

The Methodology is outlined in **Section 2** and this provides an account of the collection and collation of data for the review.

Section 3 presents a brief historical overview of quality in the Irish context from 1960-1990. This focuses on wider socio-economic conditions, childcare and early education in this period. In addition, a brief context for the period 1990-2004 is provided.

Policy aspects of quality in ECCE are considered in **Section 4**. Firstly, this details the policies of various government departments and statutory agencies. Secondly, the policies of non-statutory agencies are reviewed.

Section 5 outlines practice developments relating to quality in ECCE. This examines literature provided by a wide range of government departments, agencies and other organisations with a remit for the delivery of ECCE services.

Research developments are reviewed in **Section 6**. The period is divided in two sections; 1990-1998 and 1998-2004, owing to the increased incidence of research in the latter era. The research presented relates both to organisations and individuals.

Section 7 draws together the broad range of suggested implications for the development of the NFQ that have emerged from the review of literature and presents a set of conclusions and recommendations for consideration.

References are listed within **Section 8**. A number of Appendices are contained within **Section 9**, including the details of letters sent out to organisations and a list of the organisations contacted.

Section 2

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

This is a report of a literature review of documentation related to the issue of quality in ECCE in Ireland. This research forms one of the four pillars of research underpinning the development of the NFQ in ECCE as outlined in the Introduction. Our objective in this report is to present an analysis of current policy, practice and research in relation to quality in ECCE. The parameters of this review coincide with key landmark publications in the ECCE sector, such as the Child Care Act (Department of Health [DoH], 1991) and the Report of the Primary Education Review Body (Department of Education [DoE] 1990a), to the present day.

2.2 Information Gathering

In 2002-2003, the CECDE conducted *An Audit of Research in Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990 – 2003* (CECDE, 2003b). This publication was the first source of information for this literature review. However, the Audit noted that:

Surprisingly there has been little research in the area of Quality in the Irish context, both in relation to quality indicators or the evaluation of the more subtle and intangible aspects of quality. (CECDE 2003b:141).

Whilst the audit has been continuously updated in its online version (www.cecde.ie), we were conscious of the fact that much development work was in progress at the time the audit was conducted. Therefore, we decided to write to organisations that we believed would have documentation to offer for the current literature review. A letter (see Appendix 1) was sent to a broad variety of organisations

Methodology

(see Appendix 2) in January 2004 requesting any documentation that might be relevant to be shared with us for the purpose of a literature review on quality in ECCE. A deadline for the return of materials of February 27th 2004 was included. Initial response was slow. However, by the deadline, a substantial number of the targeted organisations had responded and had either returned relevant documentation, indicated that they would be sending materials or established that they did not have relevant materials to contribute. On the basis of this initial response, we decided to conduct a number of follow up telephone calls with organizations that had not responded by the deadline. This exercise did prove fruitful and increased the level of materials gathered.

2.3 Presentation of Findings

The two separate strategies for identifying documents pertinent to this review yielded

a substantial volume of literature pertinent to the issue of quality in ECCE in Ireland.

The database of Irish research contained the majority of these publications, and gratifyingly indicates the comprehensiveness of the information contained within this database. However, contact with organisations did produce additional documentation and also indicated that a great deal of publishing activity is in progress related to the issue of quality.

2.3.1 Letter of Request

The organisations that were targeted with letters and follow up telephone calls, requesting current literature related to quality can be categorised as either Voluntary organisations, Statutory bodies or City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs). The table below indicate the responses received from this exercise.

Table 1: Level of response to request for information.

Type of organisation	Voluntary organisation	Statutory body	City and County Childcare Committees
Level of response	(N=12)	(N=22)	(N=33)
Relevant documentation sent	9	12	7
Relevant documentation unavailable at present - in production process	0	0	3
No relevant materials	1	4	8
No response	2	6	15

Section 3

Historical Context

3.1 Introduction

Childhood is both a biological reality and a social construct. It is defined not only by biology, but also by a particular society at a particular time in a particular way which represents the view that society has of childhood. (Hayes, 2002:21)

Our concept of quality in relation to ECCE, and indeed childhood, is context-linked and time-specific. This concept has been defined and redefined and our understanding of quality has greatly advanced in the interim. Like all developments, this evolution was tempered and influenced by wider political, economic, social, cultural and religious developments and the analysis is framed within this broader vision. While we now recognise that care and education are “...*inextricably linked...*” (DES, 1999a:45), they are largely treated as separate entities prior to 1990.

The term ‘Quality’ in ECCE is a relatively new phenomenon. Historically, while ECCE services did have certain standards and criteria, quality was not a term that appeared often in the lexicon or documentation pertaining to ECCE. We see a gradual emergence of this term from the late 1980s and early 1990s to the point today where we do not speak of services without using the term ‘quality.’

3.2 Socio-economic and Demographic Evolution 1960-1990

The 1960s witnessed an awakening in Ireland regarding education and social

Historical Context

policy and an efflorescence of activity in this regard. This was facilitated and fuelled by a number of interrelated factors including economic prosperity, reduced family sizes, the decreasing influence of the Catholic Church, increased urbanisation and industrialisation and international influences. The lifting of the marriage bar, increased availability of employment and financial necessity increased female participation in the workforce and catalysed the need for childcare provision outside the home.

A remarkable shift in thinking and policy resulted in education being perceived as an investment rather than social expenditure, starting in the primary school. In addition, the state extended some universal benefits for children such as Child Benefit, and some selective services and interventions were instigated. For the first time, there was an emphasis placed on children with learning difficulties and those with special needs. However, many of the aspirations of this era were inhibited by an increasingly bleak economic climate and high unemployment.

3.3 Child Rearing and Childcare 1960-1990

Studies focusing on children from the 1960s show notable differences from the earlier part of the century, when children were part of large families, cared for within the home primarily by the mother and extended family. While fathers played a larger role in all aspects of family life, their involvement in the care and education of children in the early years still remained significantly lower than that of mothers (Hannan and Katsaiouni, 1977:43; Scheper-Hughes, 1979:148). The stage in life afforded to early childhood largely terminated around age seven, ritualised by the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Thereafter, boys spent greater amounts of

time with their fathers, being socialised into their future role, while the mother within the home, undertook a corresponding process with girls. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that boys were generally preferred to girls as they ensured patrilineal succession (Russell, 1979:127; Scheper-Hughes, 1979:169).

Children were not highly visible in communities, often kept within their homes until they were nearly of school-going age, giving them a low prominence in society. Children born with disabilities were cared for by their families or charitable institutions and there is some evidence that there was sometimes a sense of shame associated with children with disabilities.

The reduced prevalence of extended family members within the home reduced the supports available to the mother in her child caring role. Commentators asserted that this reduced the quality of the care in this period, owing to the multiple demands placed on mothers both inside and outside the home, in the absence of increased supports from fathers or external agencies (Scheper-Hughes, 1979:193). In certain cases, this led to the child being confined to a cot or crib, with less time afforded to holding and hugging and a low tolerance to crying or attention seeking. Moreover, a solution often involved ignoring the child or the use of corporal punishment, which was reported as quite prevalent even in the early years (Russell, 1979:122; Scheper-Hughes, 1979:152; Curtin and Varley, 1984:35). The findings of such studies are reinforced and corroborated by numerous biographies and memoirs from commentators throughout the twentieth century (Ferriter, 2003).

3.4 Early Childhood Education 1960-1990

The curriculum in operation in 1960 emanated from the 1920s when the Irish

Historical Context

government, following independence, attempted to frame a curricular programme congruent with Irish ideals, visions and sensibilities. The schools were viewed as the primary sites for the revival of the Irish language and the status of the language was raised to a pre-eminent position. To accommodate this renewed focus, the preceding curriculum was pruned to the core subjects to ensure a concentration on the essential elements of the Irish language, culture and history. Special emphasis was placed on the infant classes where all instruction was to be in the medium of Irish to ensure a solid basis in the language for the remainder of schooling.

There was a changed focus within the education system from the 1960s, from a nationalist and spiritual philosophy to one of investment for economic growth and national prosperity. A major catalyst in this regard was the background report for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) *Investment in Education* (DDoE, 1965a). This elucidated many of the defects within the education system and made proposals for a radical reform. There was a gradual decrease in pupil-teacher ratios and the expenditure on education rose sharply in the 1960s and 1970s. In addition, there was an increased focus on children affected by educational disadvantage and those with special needs within the education system from the 1960s.

The long overdue reform of the primary school curriculum, *The New Curriculum*, was introduced in 1971 (DoE, 1971). This comprised a radical shift in emphasis on content and methodology from its predecessor. It incorporated a wide range of subjects, utilising child-centred, heuristic and discovery learning methodologies. The child was seen as an active agent in his/her own learning, with great emphasis placed on the learning environment, while there was flexibility within the programme to cater for the individual needs and developmental stages of all pupils. The

aspirations of the 1971 curriculum were not implemented in their entirety owing to financial constraints curtailing spending on in-service training and resources, while parents and post-primary schools were not adequately informed of the changes (Coolahan, 1981). However, the principles and underlying philosophy of the New Curriculum were made operational and this led to a great improvement on the narrow and mechanical curriculum previously in operation. The *White Paper on Educational Development* (DoE, 1980) and the *Programme for Action in Education* (DoE, 1984) outlined government policy and strategy on education and this practice of increased transparency and documentation in educational policy has remained a feature since.

3.5 Summary

The period 1960-1990 witnessed an increased interest in ECCE for a number of reasons. Firstly, research was emerging highlighting the importance of ECCE in realising potential in the later years and demonstrating that these benefits were enhanced for children affected by disadvantage. Ireland was increasingly opened up to European and international ideas and learned much from global developments. The changing economy from an agrarian base to a technological base led to increased urbanisation. This resulted in families often residing in towns and cities away from the extended family that had proven such an important aspect of childcare in previous decades. Education, in this period, was no longer a luxury for the elite but a necessity for economic and social mobilisation. Women began to be more supported by their husbands in their dual role of work and family commitments.

In 1971, the introduction of a child-centred curriculum for primary education placed a special emphasis on early childhood education. Teaching methodologies were

Historical Context

improved and greater use was made of the environment and previous experiences of the child. Advancements include a special focus on children affected by disadvantage and those with special needs.

3.6 Context 1990 – 2004

The era from 1990 to the present day is characterised by dramatic changes in all aspects of life in Ireland. The population has grown from 3.6 million in 1996 to 3.9 million at present (Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2002a). In parallel with this, the number of children under six years of age rose from 256,703 in 1996 to 323,026 in 2001 (CSO, 2002b). The composition of the Irish population has been altered considerably in recent years to include greater cultural diversity, with 91.6% of the population consisting of Irish nationals; 1.3% with dual citizenships, while 5.8% are comprised of foreign nationals (CSO, 2002a). The number of applications for asylum in Ireland rose from thirty-seven in 1992 to almost 11,000 in 2001. It is estimated that in the year 2000 alone, in excess of 5,000 asylum-seeking children arrived in Ireland (Fanning *et al.*, 2001).

The traditional nuclear family as envisaged in the Irish Constitution (Government of Ireland, 1937) is being gradually replaced with a multiplicity of models. The average number of children per family fell from 2.2 in 1981 to 1.6 in 2002 (CSO, 2002e). The Irish economy has grown at an unprecedented rate from the early 1990s. In 1998, 88% of people were in employment, increasing to 96% in 2001 (CSO, 2002c). Women's participation in the workforce rose from 35.8% in 1990 to 44.3% in 1998 and further to 48.8% in 2002 (CSO, 1990-1997; CSO, 2002b). This has resulted in increased demand for out-of-home childcare (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 1999) and, while statistics on supply are not available for overall provision, it seem

likely that there has been an increase in supply despite continuing shortages (OECD, 2003).

Despite the growth in the economy, many Irish families experience poverty. The inequality in circumstances that exists between Irish families is marked with an accelerating inequality of incomes between the lowest income groups and the highest (Harvey, 2001). Of the 759,000 people living below the poverty line, 322,000 are children, giving Ireland the second highest rate of child poverty in the European Union (Harvey, 2001). The government launched the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (NAPS) (Department of Social Welfare [DSW], 1996) in 1996 and the revised NAPS '*Building an Inclusive Society*' (Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs [DSCFA], 2002) gives specific consideration to vulnerable groups, including children.

While the Catholic Church remains a powerful and dominant force in Irish life, there is evidence that its influence and control over the Irish populace is waning. This has heralded changed attitudes towards sexual activity and marriage. The number of divorces granted has increased substantially each year, from ninety-five in 1997 to 2,623 in 2000 (Harvey, 2001). With the decline in the Catholic Church's influence, the media has operated as a supplier of alternative value systems (Tovey and Share, 2000). An increasingly global media environment and advanced global communication system has meant that Irish society is increasingly being influenced by a global culture and the western view of individualism.

3.7 Conceptualisation of Children 1990-2004

In societal terms, this period witnessed great advancements in the recognition of the rights of children in society. This

Historical Context

includes a number of declarations and conventions on the rights of children as well as the establishment of a number of child advocacy groups to campaign for the rights of children.

This period also witnessed the development of a wide range of out of home ECCE services, largely in the community/ voluntary and private sector. These include childminding, day fostering, naíonraí groups, playgroups, crèches, community playgroups, day nurseries, preschools and the infant classes of primary schools. Many of these have established membership organisations to support those providing services. These organisations also became involved in lobbying the State for improved standards of services for families and children. The Child Care Act 1991 (DHC, 1991) made provision for the first time for regulation of the health and safety aspects of preschool service. However, an inspection system was not established until 1997.

Concomitant with these aforementioned societal changes is a renewed conceptualisation of children within the changed circumstances. Families are smaller in general and assume a variety of disparate forms. Children are spending an increased amount of time in out of home care settings, even from a very early age. In addition, the way in which children play and interact with the world has evolved in line with advancements in technology.

Childcare is expensive in Ireland (OECD, 2003) while child benefit and work leave for parents is poor in international terms. Purcell (2001) highlights the increasing role fathers play in the child rearing process while there is an improved emphasis on the holistic development of the child as opposed to mere physical well-being.

Policy and legislative developments both reflect and shape our perceptions of childhood in Ireland. Children have become more visible in government policy,

including the National Development Plan (NDP) and the partnership agreements. Ireland's ratification of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) catalysed a period of developments in relation to children's rights. This was followed by other policies and reports such as the *Report of the Commission on the Family* (DSCFA, 1998) and the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and children [DHC], 2000). In addition, agencies such as the Family Affairs Unit, established in 1999, the National Children's Office (NCO), founded in 2000, the Family Support Agency initiated in 2001 and the Office of Ombudsman for Children, which became operational in 2003, were established to oversee the implementation of such policies and legislation.

3.8 Conclusions

Since 1990, dramatic changes in the socio-economic status of Ireland have had a profound impact on the perception and role of children in society, as well as how they are cared for and educated. The expanding economy has necessitated an increased participation of women in the workforce, with consequential effects on the demands for out of home childcare. Changing family forms have also impacted upon the experiences of children in these formative years. Children are now increasingly targeted as consumers while technological advances have heralded changes in the way children play and interact with the world around them.

Section 4

Policy Developments 1990 – 2004

4.1 Introduction

Traditionally, there has been a dearth of activity pertaining to policy for ECCE in Ireland, as was evident from the previous section outlining the historical content. This was largely due to the lack of priority afforded to ECCE at national and local level until the 1990s for the variety of reasons outlined previously, including socio-economic factors and the relatively low participation of women within the workforce. While some positive developments in this regard were instigated following the economic boom of the 1960s and early 1970s, the recommendations of the few policy documents produced were largely ignored. These developments were also hindered by the bleaker economic realities of the 1980s when budgetary contractions reduced social spending to a minimum. The *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UN, 1989), ratified by Ireland in 1992, influenced our policy in Ireland in relation to children and the provision of quality childcare. For example, Article 18.2 states that:

State Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.
(UN, 1989:Article 18.2)

This section details policy developments from 1990 to the present day. In this time period, especially since the mid-1990s, there has been a plethora of policy documents, emanating from both statutory and non-statutory agencies relating to

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ECCE. It is important to note that this review relates to quality in ECCE and thus policy documents that do not have a focus on quality have been omitted from this particular research document. In addition, because the use of the term 'quality' is relatively new in the ECCE lexicon, earlier documents may not use it. However, where their contents impact directly on our contemporary understanding of quality, they are also included for review.

For the purpose of this paper, policy from government departments and statutory agencies will be considered first, followed by an overview of activity from the non-statutory side, including National Voluntary Childcare Organisations (NVCOs) and other agencies. Congruent with our objective of devising an NFQ for Ireland incorporating the three elements of defining, assessing and supporting quality, policy will be analysed for its relationship to these core issues. To prevent considerable overlap, policies will be discussed as a coherent whole incorporating all three elements, while Section 7, Conclusions and Recommendations, will outline the significance of policies for these individual elements.

4.1.1 Policies Relating to Statutory Agencies

Owing to the organic nature in which the ECCE sector has developed in Ireland, a broad range of government departments and agencies have assumed a multiplicity of roles and responsibilities for its administration. *The National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999:11) outlines the respective roles of eleven different departments in the management of policies relating to ECCE in Ireland:

- Department of Health and Children
- Department of Education and Science
- Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
- Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and Islands
- Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
- Department of Agriculture and Food
- Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs
- Department of the Environment
- Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation
- Department of Finance
- Department of An Taoiseach (DJELR, 1999:11)

A similar complex web of government department involvement is provided within the recent Evaluation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) Report 2000-2006 by the National Development Plan Community Support Framework Evaluation Unit (NDP/CSF, 2003:92-96). However, as previously outlined, this paper will focus exclusively on policy documents that relate to quality within ECCE. Consequently, the policies of three major government departments, and their associated agencies, are most pertinent to this review, namely the DJELR, the DES and the DHC. In addition, certain generic policies by the Department of An Taoiseach and other Departments are also included.

4.2 Department of An Taoiseach/Government of Ireland

In 1993, the *Second Commission on the Status of Women* submitted its report to government (Government of Ireland, 1993). This placed childcare as a key element that affects many women and stated at length the rationale for the development of services. The quality of services was also a prominent concern and while the report welcomed the introduction of the Child Care Act 1991 (DoH, 1991), it lamented the fact that its terms of reference limited it to the physical environment and

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that one of the most common forms of childcare, that of childminding, was largely outside the remit of the Act. It urges the implementation of the provisions of the Act and requested:

...that amended legislation should be introduced to provide for inspection by the Health Board of the quality and type of care provided.
(Government of Ireland, 1993:147)

Furthermore, the issue of standardised and accredited forms of training and qualifications for adults working in ECCE, is cited as a priority area by the Commission (Government of Ireland, 1993:147; 274).

Since the mid-1990s, children's issues and childcare have become integral elements of the Partnership Agreements at national level with the social partners. In 1996, **Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness** (Government of Ireland, 1996:30) stated that "...childcare is clearly an important issue in promoting equality for women, and especially in promoting equal opportunities in employment." One result of this Partnership agreement was the inception of the *Expert Working Group on Childcare* under the auspices of the DJELR, which will be reviewed in a later section. The **Programme for Prosperity and Fairness** initiated in 1999 also made commitments relating to childcare in its objective:

To ensure the quality of childcare provision across the country, through appropriate inspection, regulation, and personnel training systems. (Government of Ireland, 1999:119)

In **An Agreed Programme for Government Between Fianna Fáil and the Progressive Democrats** (Department of An Taoiseach, 2002), a number of commitments are made

regarding quality in early childhood education, including the following:

We are committed to helping to improve the level and quality of participation and achievement at every level of education.

To ensure that early-education services deliver the maximum benefit for all children, we will introduce a national early-education, training, support and certification system and expand state-funded early-educational places. (Department of An Taoiseach, 2002:23)

Achievement of commitments regarding children and childcare are to be realised through a number of initiatives at national and local level (Department of An Taoiseach, 2002:26).

The National Economic and Social Council's (NESC) newsletter in November 2002, **An Investment in Quality: Services, Inclusion and Enterprise, a precursor to Sustaining Progress**, stated that:

The Council would like to see the availability of high quality childcare facilities for pre-school children across the nation in a realistic timescale. (NESC, 2002:118)

Finally, **Sustaining Progress**, the social partnership agreement for 2003-2005, makes specific reference to providing quality workplace childcare for parents (Department of An Taoiseach, 2003:91).

The **National Development Plan** involves the investment of in excess of €51 billion of EU, public and private funds in the period 2000-2006. This is allocated to two regions in Ireland; the Southern and

¹ These figures have been converted from Irish Pounds (IR£) and are approximates only.

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Eastern Region (approximately €34 billion) and Border, Midland and Western Region (BMW) (approximately €17 billion¹). Childcare is highlighted as an area for priority under Social Inclusion, with €1.35 billion allocated nationally while further funds of €320 million are being made available under the Equality measures. The purpose of childcare within the NDP is stated as follows:

The allocation will be expended on increasing the supply and quality of childcare facilities, particularly on the provision of infrastructure in disadvantaged communities, increasing the number of childcare places and on encouraging private providers. (NDP, 2000, Accessed at: http://www.ndp.ie/newndp/r/NDP_exec_sum.doc, 6th May, 2004, no pages)

Section 7.6.2 of the **BMW Region Operational Programme 2000-2006** focuses on the Impacts of Social Inclusion and Childcare Priority (Sub-Measure). It promotes equality between men and women and supports participation of women within the workforce. It further states that:

This will be achieved through investment in the development of affordable, quality childcare facilities, particularly in disadvantaged areas. (BMW, 2000, Accessed at: <http://www.bmwassembly.ie/main.asp?lang=en&text=&doc=operation&chapter=7&level=3&title=7%2E6%2E2+Equality+Impact&parentID=97>, 6th May, 2004, Section 7.6.2, no pages)

In addition, it focuses on the needs of disadvantaged communities for access to training and employment opportunities:

The provision of quality childcare facilities through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Measure will facilitate parents, particularly those in economically depressed areas, to avail of employment, education and training opportunities, while also catering for the needs of disadvantaged children by initiating play and development opportunities for them. (BMW, 2000, Accessed at: <http://www.bmwassembly.ie/main.asp?lang=en&text=&doc=operation&chapter=7&level=3&title=7%2E6%2E2+Equality+Impact&parentID=97>, 6th May, 2004, Section 7.6.3, no pages)

This initiative is supported under a range of measures including capital grants to improve the quality of the environment, staffing grants to enhance training and qualifications of practitioners and the Quality sub-measure, which are detailed in Section 4.3 dealing with the DJELR and the EOCP.

In 2001, the Department of the Environment and Local Government (DELG) published **Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Childcare Facilities**. The purpose of the guidelines is to provide a framework and improve the consistency in the provision of childcare facilities. Quality of provision is a key-theme of the guidelines, “...provision must be of a suitably high quality.” (DELG, 2001:3)

Implications for the National Framework for Quality – Department of An Taoiseach

Defining Quality:

1. The provision of childcare services in order to achieve equality for women, both within the home and in the labour market, is cited as an important aspect.
2. The provision of quality services within areas of disadvantage is seen as having a double benefit – in relation to the development of the child and the opportunities afforded to parents in relation to training, education and employment.

Assessing Quality:

1. Inspection of services must be comprehensive and holistic, focusing on all aspects of all settings to ensure the optimum developmental opportunities for children.
2. The design and layout of premises is a key feature in attaining quality within services.

Supporting Quality:

1. There is a multiplicity of government departments and agencies involved in the delivery of ECCE services in Ireland. To ensure quality, it is imperative that there is cooperation and coordination between the various departments to prevent possible duplication or voids in services.
2. The training and qualifications of childcare workers is a core characteristic of quality in ECCE services and there is greater need for standardisation and recognised accreditation in this regard.
3. The inclusion of quality ECCE on the political agenda (Partnership Agreements, NDP etc.) has proven an impetus in the prioritising of funding in this regard and ongoing government commitment.

4.3 Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR)

The DJELR has played an increasingly prominent role within ECCE in recent years, primarily emerging from an equality perspective for women in relation to employment. While known as the Department of Equality and Law Reform (DELR), a **Task Force on the Travelling Community** was established and made its report in 1995 (DELR, 1995). A number of recommendations were made concerning preschool provision for Travellers. The Task Force called on the Department of Education to provide guidelines on a vast array of aspects of

preschool provisions, including enrolments, procedures for dealing with children at risk and those with special needs and parental involvement (DELR, 1995:33). The need for guidelines on practice or curriculum is highlighted as one aspect that needs to be addressed as in their absence, there is “...widespread variation from one location to the next and also has implications for the overall quality of service provided to the children...” (DELR, 1995:171) The necessity for legal registration was also noted in the era prior to the implementation of the Preschool Regulations, to govern aspects such as health, safety and welfare. The need for enhanced services is also asserted as “*Good quality, effective preschool provision is costly but research indicates that the*

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benefits, in the long run, are well worth the initial cost." (DEL, 1995:171) In addition, the training of personnel working within the Traveller preschools is cited as being of particular importance:

Personnel working in pre-schools should have early education/ childcare training and have a child-centred approach and training to ensure an understanding of Traveller culture and the specific needs of Traveller children. (DEL, 1995:33)

In 2000, the DJELR published the **First Progress Report of the Committee to Monitor and Co-ordinate the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Task Force on the Travelling Community**. This document expressed concern about the "...lack of progress generally on the recommendations of the Task Force in the area of education." (DJELR, 2000b:17) Furthermore, it recommended that "Childcare provision should be culturally appropriate..." (DJELR, 2000b:22)

In 1998, the DJELR commissioned a **Study on the Economics of Childcare in Ireland** (DJELR, 1998:48), which makes little mention on the quality of services. It outlines elements such as adult-child ratios, the size of groups and training and qualifications but the main focus is on the quantification and costing of childcare in Ireland from an economic perspective. Similarly, **Childcare Funding in Ireland** (DJELR, 2000a) primarily outlines the various funding mechanisms for childcare in Ireland, yet defines quality childcare as incorporating:

...learning opportunities as well as play which is pivotal in the development of imagination and creativity. (DJELR, 2000a:6)

One of the first major policy documents relating to childcare was produced by the

DJELR in 1999, the **National Childcare Strategy** (DJELR, 1999). The Expert Working Group on Childcare, which produced the Report, had been established under *Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitiveness* in 1996 as "...childcare is clearly an important issue in promoting equality for women, and especially in promoting equal opportunities in employment." (Government of Ireland, 1996:30) The aim of the Expert Working Group:

...was to develop a strategy which integrates the different strands of the current arrangements for the development and delivery of childcare and early educational services. (DJELR, 1999:XXII).

In total, the Report made 27 recommendations towards achieving the aforementioned aim. Two of the Guiding Principles of the Report related directly to Quality:

Achieving high quality childcare services is an integral part of the structure and implementation of the National Childcare Strategy. A quality childcare service must be regarded as one which provides enhancing experiences for children and positive interactions between adults and children. (DJELR, 1999:49)

This places quality at the heart of any provision of ECCE services at both structural and setting level. It further outlines the components of a quality service, identifying play, the environment, equipment and resources, training and qualifications of personnel and parental involvement, among others, as inherent elements of a quality service. Moreover, the second principle above identifies the interactions between children and adults as a key constituent to quality. The critical necessity of achieving quality in services is also evidenced not only in terms of the

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benefits to the individual child, but also in the long-term consequences in relation to the economy and society. Conversely, the effects of poor quality services are outlined, which are noted as being possibly “...*detrimental to childcare.*” (DJELR, 1999:52)

The *National Childcare Strategy* also attempts to delineate the multiple perspectives from which quality can be viewed, interpreted and defined, elucidating the complexity which surrounds the production of a comprehensive definition of quality congruent with the standpoint of all. The following is a list of possible viewpoints of stakeholders evaluating the quality of services, the views of which any definition must recognise and incorporate:

- Child development perspective
- Government / Regulatory perspective
- Social Service perspective
- Parent perspective
- Child perspective
- Social funding policy perspective
- Staff perspective
- Cultural perspectives (DJELR, 1999:52).

The Report also outlines possible ways of defining the quality of services by the use of indicators, which must be context-specific. Input indicators refer to concrete features such as the premises and equipment and are easily defined. Process indicators consist of the day-to-day happenings such as relationships and interactions and are more difficult to define. Lastly, outcome indicators relate to the impact of provision such as health and well-being.

Following on from the recommendations in the *National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999) and the White Paper on Early Childhood Education, *Ready to Learn*, (DES, 1999a) and other policy documents (Coolahan, 1998; OMNA, 2000), the DJELR undertook the production of a

Model Framework for Education, Training, and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (DJELR, 2002a). This also followed on from the government commitment in the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness (Government of Ireland, 1999:119) to fund research into training and qualifications and to this end, the Certifying Bodies Subgroup of the National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee (NCCC) (see EOCP section below), was established. *The Model Framework* outlines the occupational profiles and core skills of all personnel working in the ECCE sector and details how these profiles should be used to inform the development of education and training programmes. In its Foreword, the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform outlines the core necessity of appropriate training and qualifications to achieve quality within the sector and for the development of the sector:

The issue of quality in any sector is inextricably linked to the issues of training, education and professional development. (DJELR, 2002a:3)

A central rationale for the development of core skills and occupational profiles also is to ensure that quality in services can be assessed and evaluated. As was stated within the document:

Quality assurance is a way to organise and manage activities so that they are informed by, and can be evaluated against, a set of agreed standards. (DJELR, 2002a:30)

The *Model Framework* also elucidates the multiple perspectives present in any definition of quality for ECCE. The complexity, yet necessity, entailed in incorporating the viewpoints of the various stakeholders within services is also stressed. This document lists such perspectives as follows:

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- Quality as exceptional
- Quality as perfection
- Quality as fitness for purpose
- Quality as value for money
- Quality as transformation
- Quality as accountability
- Quality as fitness for purpose (DJELR, 2002a:31)

It concludes that consensus on a definition regarding quality should allow for diversity and flexibility, incorporating “...*the pursuit of excellence which has the capacity to transform.*” (DJELR, 2002a:31) Thus, quality must be an integral element of the day-to-day activities of each setting through good practice, communication, transparency and efficiency. Finally, the *Model Framework* stresses the importance of a support framework in attaining quality, “...*that quality cannot be imposed. It has to be stimulated and nurtured through partnership with all stakeholders* (DJELR, 2002a:31).

4.3.1 DJELR Programmes

This section details a number of programmes under the auspices of the DJELR. The prominence of the DJELR within the childcare sector has been greatly enhanced by virtue of its administration of the ***Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme*** (EOCP). This provides €449.49 million over the lifetime of the NDP for the development of childcare; to improve the quality, to increase the quantity and to introduce a co-ordinated approach to service delivery (DJELR, 2002a:3). An infrastructure was established from 2000 to underpin the administration of the EOCP.² A total of thirty-three City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) have been established nationally to achieve these objectives at local level. Area

² For a comprehensive overview of this childcare infrastructure, please consult the Evaluation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006 (NDP/CSF, 2003:92-93)

Development Management (ADM) was commissioned to assess and evaluate grant requests and to provide statistical information relating to the implementation of the EOCP.

In addition, funding is channelled through the NVCOs to address quality at both a national and local level. The NCCC is composed of representatives of the statutory and non-statutory sectors and performs a multiplicity of functions. Much of this work is achieved through its working groups, which relate to individual aspects of childcare, and consequently play a role in the improvement of quality:

- The Certifying Bodies Subgroup has addressed qualifications, training and accreditation, which led to the aforementioned *Model Framework*,
- The Advisory Subgroup for Children with Special Requirements, Minority Ethnic Groups and Traveller Children looks at the needs of children with special requirements;
- The Working Subgroup on School Age Childcare addresses the issue of out of school care for children attending school;
- The Childminding Subgroup considers the issue of childminders outside the remit of the Preschool Services Regulations (DJELR, 2002a:37).

An Interdepartmental Synergies Group on Childcare was established to ensure coordination between initiatives and funding from various departments. This group has not met since 2001 and many of its functions are performed by the NCCC. The EOCP consists of three main funding strands:

1. The Childcare Facilities (Capital Grants) Measure;
2. The Support for Staffing Grants Sub-measure;
3. The Quality Improvement Sub-measure (NDP/CSF, 2003:56-57).

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The first two strands address the issue of improving the environment and staffing of ECCE service provision. These are both key factors in the delivery of quality services. The third strand, which provided €35.7 million “...to raise the quality of childcare provision in this country” (NDP/CSF, 2003:I) has engendered a wide range of activities towards quality. The purpose of this strand was to support seven NVCOs (Barnardos, Childminding Ireland, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Association, National Children’s Nurseries Association, Forbairt Naíonraí Teo and St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland) to enhance quality by providing training opportunities, quality accreditation programmes and seminars. In addition, this funding supports the aims and objectives, pertaining to quality, of the thirty-three CCCs. The specific objectives for the Quality Improvement Sub-measure are to:

- Facilitate and support the development of the NVCOs;
- Promote the development of all aspects of family day care provision;
- Support the development of childcare training;
- Increase the number of trained workers;
- Facilitate the development of local childcare networks to support those working in isolation. (NDP/CSF, 2003:2)

The quest to support quality was one of the more difficult elements to define within the EOCP. The result was greater fragmentation in the provision of supports to existing structures to ameliorate quality in provision. The interim evaluation of the EOCP concluded that the progress made, particularly in respect of the Quality Improvement Sub-measure, was disappointing. One of the main deficiencies cited was in respect of the assessment of tangible outcomes due to the absence of indicators to capture the outputs of the

NVCOs and CCCs regarding quality (NDP/CSF, 2003:62). The Report makes a number of recommendations to improve the functioning of the Quality Improvement Sub-measure, including that:

1. The funding of the CCCs should be linked to the pre and post-approval of grant-aid support to project promoters;
2. CCCs should set local county targets around programme indicators;
3. CCCs should be proactive in working up applications for childcare where gaps are identified;
4. A definition of ‘trained worker’ needs to be developed and allow for the gathering of data on numbers who have received training;
5. Future funding of the NVCOs should be linked to “...verifiable outputs directly related to the realisation of programme objectives.” Indicators need to be developed to capture the outputs of the NVCOs (NDP/CSF, 2003:VII).

All CCCs produced a **Strategic Plan** for the period 2001/2002-2006 between 2002 and 2003.³ Guidelines or a broad framework on the format and content of these plans were provided by the NCCC and its various subgroups on the core elements to be included. This afforded considerable latitude to the individual CCCs to place particular emphasis on certain aspects according to local needs and requirements. However, it ensured that key elements, such as Quality, are featured in all Strategic Plans. Therefore this review does not list the contents of each of the thirty-three CCCs individually but reviews the overarching features of the Strategic Plans as a whole.

Following an analysis of a selection of Strategic Plans, it is evident that quality is a core and inherent element of all aspects of

³ For a detailed listing of all CCC Strategic Plans, please see CECDE (2003b:38-39).

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the work of the CCCs. A diversity of approaches are undertaken in outlining the roles and functions of the various CCCs. However, in all cases, regardless of the terminology used such as Mission Statement, Vision, Aim, Guiding Principles, Targets, Themes, Actions, Objectives, Goals etc., quality is cited as a core constituent of all work of the CCCs. The strategies outline a number of actions they will take such as provision of advice, networking, appointment of Childcare Training and Quality Development Officers, as well as co-ordinating with and supporting the work of other related agencies in achieving and maintaining quality within their jurisdictions. Many draw on both national and international research in relation to quality indicators. The majority emphasise the importance of looking at the dynamic as well as static variables of quality. Some of the substantive issues raised in this regard include:

- Training of childcare personnel (pre-service and ongoing professional development);
- Remuneration of staff;
- Staff-child ratios;
- Recognition of diversity;
- Equipment and resources;
- Parental participation;
- Registration and formalisation of informal services;
- Suitability of premises.

In addition, many of the concerns and complexities in relation to quality such as the difficulty in attaining an inclusive definition acceptable to all, the multiple perspectives from which it can be interpreted and the supports necessary for its achievement are outlined and some proposals are made to rectify these challenges.

In December 2003, the DJELR initiated the **National Childminder's Initiative Childminders Development Grant** under the EOCP. This is administered through the CCCs and its primary purpose "... is to offer an incentive, in the form of a small capital grant, to childminders to enhance and support their awareness of quality childcare." (Childcare Directorate, 2003:2) This policy initiative involves provision of up to €630 in grant aid to individual childminders, for the purchase of items such as toys and equipment, or to use for adaptations within their homes. For childminders who are not notified, receipt of the money is conditional on their attendance at a short Quality Awareness Course. The main objectives of the course are to:

1. Provide participants with an awareness of the issues involved in the provision of a quality childminding service;
2. Enhance knowledge, skills and professional status of childminders;
3. Develop confidence and motivation;
4. Encourage networking in the locality.

The five modules involved focus on:

- Week 1 - Why choose childminding?;
- Week 2 - Child Development – An Overview;
- Week 3 - Hygiene, Health & Safety;
- Week 4- Well-being of Children;
- Week 5 – Play (Childcare Directorate, 2003 [Appendix]:2)

These elements aspire to improve the quality of services among providers by enhancing their skills and knowledge, improving the equipment and resources available to them and by increasing the prominence of local networks and support mechanisms.

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - DJELR

Defining Quality:

1. The role of the DJELR in ECCE in Ireland has largely been in its remit in achieving equality for women.
2. Explicit policies and guidelines are seen as important to guide best practice within settings, including enrolments, children with special needs, parental involvement and curriculum.
3. ECCE services need to be culturally appropriate for the children and parents involved.
4. The quality of the services provided not only impacts on the immediate child, but also has broader social and economic implications for society.
5. Quality is a complex phenomenon that can be viewed from a multiplicity of perspectives and any definition must encapsulate such divergent viewpoints.
6. The provision of adequate opportunities for play is seen as necessary in the attainment of quality.
7. The environment of the child is seen as impacting on the quality of the services provided.
8. The equipment and resources within the setting impact upon the quality of the services.
9. The level of involvement of parents within settings is seen as a factor in the quality of the service provided.

Assessing Quality:

1. The nature of adult-child interactions are seen as integral to the achievement of quality within settings.

Supporting Quality:

1. Training, education and ongoing professional development of all personnel in ECCE is an important element to ensure quality provision. Clear pathways of progression within qualifications must be identified to enhance the professionalism of the sector.
2. Quality is a feature that cannot be enforced through imposition alone. Supports must be in place to ensure that it is developed and nurtured.
3. A national policy and infrastructure are needed to implement initiatives in relation to ECCE.
4. A local infrastructure is also necessary for the delivery of initiatives and to provide supports on the ground for services.
5. Funding is imperative to support the attainment of quality through the provision of an array of supports.
6. Registration and the formalisation of informal services by providing supports is an important initiative in achieving quality for all children in all services.

Policy Developments 1990-2004**4.4 Department of Education and Science (DES)**

The DES has a long tradition of involvement in early childhood education by virtue of universal provision for children in the infant classes of the primary schools. This catered for approximately half of all four-year olds and nearly all five year-old children in recent years (DES, 2003c). Traditionally, the DES has also involved itself with targeted interventions for children with special needs and those affected by educational disadvantage. A number of policy documents throughout the 1990s have referred to the quality of provision within the infant classes and also in other initiatives implemented by the DES. The **Report of the Primary Education Review Body** (DoE, 1990a) dedicates a full section to the issue of “*Quality of Education.*” Within this, the concern for quality as an international phenomenon is acknowledged, as is the fact that quality “...is a multifaceted, often subjective concept with a variety of meanings and is variously used by different interests.” (DoE, 1990a:30) It further lists some of the various interest groups and the factors which impact upon quality within the education system and briefly outlines how such elements might be achieved. Among the factors impacting on quality are the following:

- A suitable curriculum, implemented, monitored and evaluated at class, school and national levels;
- The competence and commitment of the teachers which entails the selection of suitable student teachers, pre-service and in-service education of high quality and satisfactory working conditions;
- Effective management, involving all interests, which defines aims and objectives and devises strategies for implementing them;
- Competent leadership from the School Principal and due delegation of responsibility to post holders;
- Maximum use of learning and teaching time and of the time available for planning and preparation;
- Suitable structures for parental involvement, with good home-school links;
- Careful monitoring by the Inspectorate of the performance of schools;
- Relevant evaluation by school staffs and Boards of Management coupled with feedback from parents;
- Enlightened planning and adequate financial provision by the State. (DoE, 1990a:31)

The “...crucial importance of ensuring the quality and effectiveness of what is experienced in our primary schools” is cited as being an imperative by the Report (DoE, 1990a:5). It makes a number of recommendations for the review of the primary school curriculum relating to all subjects and also to the role of assessment within the system.

The Green Paper on Education, **Education for a Changing World** (DoE, 1992) also placed a focus on quality within the education system. The foreword of this document states that “...no education system can be frozen in time. If it is to continue to deliver quality, it must constantly adapt to changing educational needs and to changes in the world it serves.” (DoE, 1992:Foreword) The quality of teachers, and the ongoing assessment of quality, is also cited as being of paramount importance in maintaining and enhancing the quality of the system as a whole (DoE, 1992:163-169). Furthermore a chapter is dedicated to “*Quality Assurance in the New Structures*”, including both internal and external assessment and inspection systems (DoE, 1992:173-175).

In order to inform the consultative process initiated by the Green Paper, a National Education Convention was held in Dublin in October 1993. Quality occupies a central

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position within the **Report of the National Education Convention:**

Improving the quality of education within schools should be a central goal of any education reform movement. The quality of education depends on many variables, including the competence of staff, school leadership, the quality of planning, pupil-teacher ratios, support services, the social context and levels of parental and community support. (Coolahan, 1994:55)

The Report further details the role of the school in ensuring quality through self-assessment and through the School Plan. The role of the Inspectorate, the need for psychological and guidance services and the integral role of support services to schools are also discussed. The reality of the Irish context meant that all the desired changes would not be immediately feasible regarding quality assurance and there was consensus that “*priorities should be established and their provision planned for in a reasoned and co-ordinated manner.*” (Coolahan, 1994:68).

In 1993, the **Report of the Special Education Review Committee** was published (DoE, 1993). This identified structures for the early identification of special needs in young children and recommended that the Department of Health continue its role in delivering, co-ordinating, advising and supporting children with special needs. A number of recommendations are made relating to the quality of services within preschools, including staff-child ratios, the suitability of staff qualifications and the maintenance of a database for children with physical, cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional development problems.

The Green Paper and consultative process was followed by a White Paper on Education, **Charting our Educational**

Future (DoE, 1995). Quality is noted as one of the principles for the development of a philosophical rationale for the role of the State in education:

Students are entitled to the highest possible standard of teaching and to be facilitated in the attainment of the highest quality of learning. (DoE, 1995:7).

In addition:

Quality is brought about by maximising the efforts of all those responsible for the education of students and by co-ordinating all the structures of the system... (DoE, 1995:8).

Quality is also cited as an aim for the education system (DoE, 1995:10). The role of the state in promoting quality is seen as multi-faceted, incorporating the curriculum, teaching and assessment, the quality of teachers, institutional management and planning processes (DoE, 1995:8). The quality of teachers is noted as being of paramount importance in achieving quality and a number of elements of teacher competence is outlined (DoE, 1995:27). Also:

The quality, morale and status of the teaching profession are of central importance to the continuing development of a first-class education system in the decades ahead. (DoE, 1995:121)

Additionally, assessment is noted as being of central importance “*...in monitoring and enhancing the quality of education at school and national levels.*” (DoE, 1995:28) The central role of the Inspectorate in assuring quality within the system is treated in detail (DoE, 1995:183).

The **Early Start Pre-school Pilot Project** was introduced in 1994 in a selection of designated disadvantaged

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schools in urban areas in Ireland. The primary aims of this initiative are to enhance children's overall development through an educational programme and to offset the effects of social disadvantage (DES, 2002a:1). It places an emphasis on good staff-child ratios, a developmentally appropriate curriculum, parental and community involvement and the importance of facilitating transition into formal schooling (Murphy, 2000:10). The rationale behind the intervention is that:

Intervention programmes, which provide high quality early childhood education, are regarded as necessary components of a policy that seeks to address problems of inequity in the educational and social systems. (DES, 2002a:4)

A National Forum for Early Childhood Education was convened in March 1998 and this afforded the ECCE sector in Ireland the first opportunity to come together to express their concerns and share their insights. This occasion led to some realisation of many of the common issues of all stakeholders within the sector; those within the formal and non-formal sector as well as those with particular leanings towards either education or care. One of these common areas of understanding was related to the quality of services in 1998:

...that the quality of provision is variable, that there are not enough childcare places, that it is often difficult to obtain information on what is available, and that parents are concerned about standards, qualifications, and inspection procedures. (Coolahan, 1998:53)

However, equally there were concerns that in the quest for quality, the rich diversity in services that has developed would be lost and that children would be treated uniformly:

It was also recommended that the designation of quality criteria should not mean a diminution of diversity of early childhood provision. (Coolahan, 1998:53)

The positive benefits of high quality provision were cited and conversely, the negative impact of poor quality services in placing children at risk came to the fore of the discussion. There was consensus that there could be no one standard of excellence in services across all settings but instead a set of core criteria should be identified towards which services could strive. Participants at the Forum were in agreement relating to five core interdependent indicators of quality (with multiple subheadings) which incorporate Input, Process and Outcome elements:

1. Child indicators
2. Staff indicators
3. Physical Environment Indicators
4. Social Indicators
5. Natural Indicators (Coolahan, 1998:55-56).

The dynamic nature of these quality indicators was also outlined and the need for them to be "...contextualised both spatially and temporally. They should evolve over time and changing circumstance and ought not to stifle diversity". (Coolahan, 1998:56) Training and qualifications was a core feature of quality as cited by delegates and the need for a national system of accreditation was highlighted:

At a national level, approaches to improving the quality of early education and childcare should include better coordination of services, the establishment of standards, specification of a training and qualification framework for individuals working in early education and childcare, and support for provision on a wider scale that exists at present. (Coolahan 1998:57)

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The importance of being able to recognise and assess quality from a parental perspective also featured prominently within the Forum proceedings (Coolahan, 1998:146).

Until the introduction of the **Education Act** (DES, 1998), there was a virtual absence of legislation underpinning the education system in Ireland. Further, the **Education Welfare Act** (DES, 2000a) relates to issues of pupil attendance at school by the establishment of the National Education Welfare Board, which will assist the promotion of quality for children at risk of truancy or drop-out from the system.

The consultative process of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education supported and underpinned the DES White Paper on Early Childhood Education, **Ready to Learn** (DES, 1999a). Quality is a core concept of this policy document, as the Minister for Education states in the foreword to the publication, “*Quality of provision is the key theme of the White Paper.*” (DES, 1999a:VI) Congruent with *The National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999:45), *Ready to Learn* states that care and education are inseparable and should be provided “...in a complementary, seamless fashion.” (DES, 1999a:4) Moreover, the White Paper stresses the importance of high quality services for young children, holding that:

The quality of the early child-based education provided determines, to a very great degree, the nature and duration of the benefits obtained. (DES, 1999a:43)

Once again, in line with other documents, it is appreciated that the quest for quality is a journey that needs to be supported and that cannot be imposed (DES, 1999a:43). The varying perspectives and interpretations of the stakeholders in the ECCE sector is also recognised, including parents, childcare workers, teachers, employers and children (DES, 1999a:53). The relative stages and

status of elements of quality are acknowledged and the need to define, assess and support the more dynamic and intangible aspects of quality not governed by regulations, including adult-child interactions, training and qualifications and parental involvement, is stressed (DES, 1999a:54). Staff-child ratios, space, equipment, interactions and the appropriateness of activities for children are all cited as key elements of quality (DES, 1999a:53). The provision of an appropriate curriculum, the designing of a system of inspection and the delineation of suitable training and qualifications for practitioners are cited as the principal concerns and mechanisms for monitoring quality.

A particular focus on quality services for children with special needs and those affected by disadvantage is evident within the White Paper. Regarding special needs, it states:

...early childhood intervention is effective when it provides high quality, intensive and clearly articulated programme, delivered by highly skilled and carefully trained personnel in contexts of small group and individual instruction and which are planned to specifically to address individual, identified needs. (DES, 1999a:84)

Ready to Learn proposes the introduction of a Quality in Education Mark (QE) for services reaching agreed quality standards. The assessment aspect for the QE mark would incorporate existing DoH Regulations (DoH, 1996a) and also educational elements. The White Paper distinguishes between inspection and evaluation; inspection simply ensures compliance whereas an evaluation system:

...seeks to determine what constitutes best practice, to assess the effectiveness of various early childhood education approaches and

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intervention and to indicate how effectiveness and efficiency may be enhanced. (DES, 1999a:124)

The White Paper favours a single evaluation system, or single evaluator, to assess all these components. Moreover, the role of the evaluator would also incorporate a supportive element:

...in addition to their inspection role, inspectors will be available to support providers and suggest ways of remedying deficiencies. (DES, 1999a:123)

The establishment of an Early Childhood Education Agency (ECEA) was proposed by the White Paper to fulfil the many objectives and recommendations cited therein. As outlined in the Introduction, the CECDE was established in October 2002 as a seed agency to the ECEA. The core function of the CECDE is the development of an NFQ. This is stated in our Programme of Work (CECDE, 2001) and the process for its realisation outlined in our Research Strategy (CECDE, 2003a).

The CECDE has also completed some baseline research (see Section 6 for more detail) in the form of *An Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990-2003* (CECDE, 2003b), where a chapter is dedicated to the theme of quality in Irish research. In addition, *On Target? An Audit of Provision of Services Targeting Disadvantage and Special Needs among Children from Birth to Six Years in Ireland* (CECDE, 2004a) has also been compiled. The outcomes of a national consultation process on the issue of quality, *Talking About Quality*, have been published (CECDE, 2004b). *Perspectives on Childhood* (CECDE, Forthcoming A) is in the process of being developed. *Making Connections, A Review of International Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education* (CECDE, Forthcoming B) will be published in late 2004.

Pupils within the infant classes followed the New Curriculum of 1971 until the introduction of the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999b). This built on many of the child-centred and holistic philosophies underpinning the previous curriculum. The curriculum is presented in a suite of 23 curricular books outlining the aims, objectives, content, concepts and assessment of each curricular area. In the Introduction to the **Primary School Curriculum 1999**, “*Quality in Education*” is listed as the first key issue in primary education. The curriculum advances the rights of children in this regard:

Each child is entitled to the best possible quality of education and it is the responsibility of the state to provide for this through the education system. Curriculum is an important determinant of quality in education, and the standards of learning children achieve through their engagement with it will be a measure of its effectiveness. (DES, 1999b:26 Introduction).

Early childhood education is also a key issue in primary education considering the number of four and five - year olds within the education system (DES, 1999b:30 Introduction). Inherent in the curriculum for the infant classes is the flexibility to accommodate the multiple levels of attainment of children in all aspects of development on entry to schooling. Play is a core feature of the curriculum while language is central to the programme followed in the infant classes. In addition, the role of assessment is stressed as an integral element of the curriculum “...to ensure quality in education.” (DES, 1999b:17 Introduction)

There are six main areas within the curriculum:

1. Language
2. Mathematics

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- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE) 4. Arts Education 5. Physical Education 6. Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) | <p>distinct categories; for children with mild general learning disabilities (NCCA, 2002a-i), for children with moderate learning disabilities (NCCA, 2002j-l) and for children with severe and profound general learning disabilities (NCCA, 2002m-o).</p> |
|---|---|

Each of these areas has relevance to the infant classes and the components and aspects of the curriculum for these classes are delineated. In support of the introduction of the Revised Curriculum the DES distributed *Your Child's Learning – Guidelines for Parents* (DES, 1999c), outlining the key features of the curriculum and ways in which parents and schools could collaborate regarding the implementation of the curriculum.

Draft curricular guidelines for children with special needs in the primary school were issued as consultation documents in 2002 (NCCA, 2002a-o), following an earlier discussion document, *Special Educational Needs – Curricular Needs* (NCCA, 1999). This earlier document acknowledged the limited training opportunities for practitioners pertaining to special needs, at both pre-service and in-service levels, and the negative impact this has on the provision of quality services (NCCA, 1999). Children with special needs have additional requirements within the education system and a high level of flexibility and continuity is required within curricular planning. This consultation document was used to inform the production of Draft Curricular Guidelines and facilitated a wider forum for the input of stakeholders in this regard.

The *Draft Curricular Guidelines* (NCCA, 2002 a-o) draw on the most recent national and international best practice and research to support the planning and implementation of the curriculum for students with general disabilities. The intention is that the guidelines are to be used in conjunction with and to complement the mainstream curriculum. The guidelines are divided into three

Each category contains a number of booklets; including **Guidelines for Teachers** and guidelines on an array of curricular areas including Mathematics, Communications and Language, Arts Education and SPHE. The draft guidelines were open to comment and review and will be revised and finalised following a period of consultation.

In addition to the above, The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has recently launched *Towards a Framework for Early Learning - A Consultative Document* (NCCA, 2004). This is an important development considering the emphasis placed on the curriculum in achieving quality:

The development of a national framework is an important step in helping to provide all children with appropriately enriching, challenging and enjoyable learning opportunities from birth to six years. (NCCA, 2004:14)

This is a background paper for consultation in the process of devising a national framework for early years learning. The Framework has four main aims:

- To support the development of all children 0-6 as confident and competent learners;
- To emphasise the important role of parents/guardians;
- To guide parents/childminders/practitioners in planning and providing appropriate learning experiences;
- To support existing good practices in early learning (NCCA, 2004:13).

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The consultative document contains a number of sections and themes and it aspires to improve the quality of ECCE by providing a framework for the delivery of an appropriate curriculum or programme. The role of the adult as central to the child's learning through quality interactions is one of the key emerging principles (NCCA, 2004:41).

Throughout the 1990s, a number of schemes were introduced to alleviate the effects of educational disadvantage within the primary school system⁴. These include the Disadvantaged Areas Schools Scheme (1990), the Home-School-Community Liaison Scheme (1990), Breaking the Cycle Scheme (DoE, 1997), the New Deal (DES, 1999d) and Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage (DES, 2001). While the documentation surrounding these schemes does not explicitly refer to quality, their core rationale is to improve the quality of the educational experience for pupils affected by disadvantage. (See Section 5 for further details).

The education of Traveller children also received attention in this time period. In 1994, the Department of Education published ***The Education of Traveller Children in National Schools – Guidelines*** (DoE, 1994) and these guidelines were superseded by revised ***Guidelines on Traveller Education in Primary Schools*** in 2002 (DES, 2002b). These guidelines address the appropriateness of education provision for Traveller children in the Irish context and the importance of developing home-school links. A core element of the latest guidelines is the presentation of a rationale for an intercultural curriculum within the primary school system to support the education of Travellers.

The Primary School Inspectorate is responsible for the assessment of the quality of education in the primary schools.

Inspectors follow a generic framework for school evaluations in all classes, including the infant classes and Early Start. The legislative mandate for this evaluation emanates from the *Education Act* (DES, 1998). Specifically relating to quality, Section 7 (2) (b) places the onus “...to monitor and assess the quality...and effectiveness of the education system...” on the Minister for Education. Section 13 of the *Education Act* further outlines the role of assessment in achieving quality in the education system in the following statements:

...evaluate the organisation and operation of those schools and centres and the quality and effectiveness of education provided in those schools or centres, including the quality of effectiveness of individual teachers. (DES, 1998: Section 13 (3) (a) (i) (I))

...to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the provision of education in the State, including comparison with relevant international practices and standards, and to report thereon to the Minister. (DES, 1998:Section 13 (3) (b))

In 1999, the DES published the ***Report on the 1998/1999 Pilot Project on Whole School Evaluation*** (WSE) (DES, 1999e). The purpose of the WSE initiative was to involve schools in a partnership approach to the evaluation process, owing to the multiplicity of factors that affect quality. The generation of objective and dependable data was seen as an imperative to the evaluation of individual schools, and also the education system as a whole. As was stated within the Report:

Quality can be best achieved when all the partners share common goals and objectives for the development of the education system and when positive, professional relationships

⁴ For a comprehensive overview of these initiatives, please see Murphy (2000).

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are maintained between the school community and the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science. (DES, 1999e:7)

The process of identifying, acknowledging and affirming good practice within schools, in addition to recognising and planning to improve weaker elements was a core function of the Pilot, with a view to “...*the assurance of quality within the education system...*” (DES, 1999e:7).

Regarding the development of the system, the Inspectorate promotes self-review within schools and through its involvement with the School Development Planning Initiative. The Inspectorate also plays an integral role in curriculum development, special education, disadvantage and social inclusion initiatives and ongoing professional development.

In 2000, the Inspectorate published a ***Professional Code of Practice on Evaluation and Reporting for the Inspectorate*** (DES, 2000b). This formalised the principles underpinning the traditional practices of the Inspectorate and outlines the standards to which the Inspectorate works. One of the general principles of the Inspectorate is to “...*report on the quality of education in schools and on the system as a whole*” (DES, 2000b:1), while an aim of evaluation is “...*to promote continuing improvement in the quality of education offered by schools.*” (DES, 2000b:1) The Inspectorate also commits itself to providing reports of the highest quality, in both oral and written formats.

The role of the inspector also incorporates a support function for teachers, managers and principals. The evolution of the Inspectorate since its inception in 1831 is outlined in ***The Inspectorate – A Brief Guide***, yet the essence of the work remains constant:

However, its core tasks, - the inspection and evaluation of the quality of schooling, advising on

educational policy and supporting teachers and school management – have remained constant to the present day. (DES, 2002c:5)

As part of its evaluation role, the promotion of quality is of primary importance and it is the view of the Inspectorate that this is “...*best achieved through a combination of complementary internal and external evaluation.*” (DES, 2002c:9) Schools are inspected on a cyclical basis, involving a focus on all aspects of the functioning of the school. The aims of evaluation are to:

- Identify, acknowledge and affirm good practice;
- Promote continuing improvement on the quality of education;
- Promote self-evaluation and continuous development by schools and to
- Provide assurance of quality on the education system as a whole, based on the collection of objective, dependable and high quality data. (DES, 2002c:14)

The Tuaraise Scoile or School Report focuses on the following aspects of the organisation and work of the school:

- Environmental factors that affect the effectiveness of the teacher’s work;
- Organisation and atmosphere of the school/general programme of work;
- General development of pupils and progress in various parts of the curriculum (DES, 2002c:4)

In December 2002, the Inspectorate published a snapshot of the findings regarding the evaluation of a selection of schools; ***Fifty School Reports: What Inspectors Say*** (DES, 2002d). This once again reiterated the multiple roles of the Inspectorate not only in evaluation, but also in the development and support of each school and the system as a whole. The Report focuses on three core areas:

1. Whole-school Issues (Board of

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- Management, in-school management, staffing and organisation, accommodation, parental involvement);
2. General Curriculum Issues (school planning, teacher's planning, principles and methodologies, resources, assessment);
 3. Curriculum Areas (Irish, English, Maths, SESE, Arts education, Physical education, SPHE) (DES, 2002d:7).

As an aid to assisting schools in conducting self-evaluation and self-review and to “...further assist school communities in fulfilling their quality assurance obligations,” the DES published **Looking at our School - An Aid to Self-Evaluation in Primary Schools** (DES, 2003a). As is stated within the Foreword:

Quality in schools is a matter for all concerned with, and involved in, the education of our children. (DES, 2003a:V)

In addition, the report goes on to say:

The maintenance of the quality of education in individual primary schools is a major aim of education policy in Ireland. (DES, 2003a:VII)

For the purpose of conducting such an evaluation, five core themes are addressed, with each further broken-down into a myriad of aspects and components:

1. School management;
2. School planning;
3. Curriculum provision;
4. Learning and teaching in curriculum areas;
5. Support for pupils (DES, 2003a:IX).

Schools are encouraged to look at these

themes either individually or collectively, or even to focus on particular tenets within the themes, while there is also a facility to submit other themes that may relate to an individual school context. The view of the Inspectorate is congruent with that of much of the literature regarding quality, that “...it may be useful to think of a quality continuum consisting of a number of reference points representing stages of development in the improvement process.” (DES, 2003a:X)

In 2003, the Primary School Inspectorate also published a **National Evaluation Report on Preschools for Travellers** (DES, 2003b). The review focused on many aspects of the functioning of the Traveller preschools, including:

- Management;
- Pupil admission, registration and attendance;
- Accommodation;
- Funding;
- Staff and staff training;
- Teaching and learning;
- Making linkages (DES, 2003b).

The Report concludes by affirming the positive aspects of the Traveller preschools and the need to recognise and ameliorate certain aspects that may be reducing the quality of services:

The important role played by Traveller pre-schools in the provision of early childhood learning experiences to Traveller Children should be acknowledged and steps taken to further enhance the quality of the experience for present and future cohorts of children attending these pre-schools. (DES, 2003b:75)

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - DES

Defining Quality:

1. Quality is a difficult concept to define and is viewed by stakeholders in the system from a variety of perspectives. This diversity of perspectives is seen as a positive aspect of the ECCE sector and should be supported.
2. There can be no one single definition of quality; rather a set of core criteria should be identified, which settings can work towards attaining.
3. The suitability and flexibility of the curriculum or programme in place is an important characteristic of quality.
4. The quality of the service provided impacts upon the nature and duration of the benefits to the child.
5. The quality of the personnel working in early years settings impacts significantly on the quality of the services provided.
6. Effective management and leadership structures must be in place to ensure the setting performs to its maximum potential.
7. Parental and community involvement and the establishment of positive home school links are a key characteristic for quality.
8. It is imperative to acknowledge the evolving and dynamic nature of quality in settings to ensure that quality remains attainable in the contemporary context.
9. Definitions of quality must include Input, Process and Outcome elements such as child indicators, staff indicators, physical environment indicators, social indicators and natural indicators.
10. Adult-child interactions are seen as being an integral characteristic to high quality services.
11. Quality must be regarded as a continuum with a number of reference points that can be worked towards either individually or collectively.
12. The provision of an intercultural curriculum is seen as an important support for the education of Traveller children.
13. Curricular guidelines must be flexible to accommodate the capacities and dispositions of all pupils, including those with special needs.

Assessing Quality:

1. Careful inspection and evaluation of settings are a key element to ensuring that quality is achieved and maintained. Such evaluation should incorporate wider educational stakeholders, including parents, teachers and management.
2. Assessment must include both self-assessment within settings and external inspection to ensure quality is achieved.
3. Legislation underpinning the assessment of the education system affords a statutory basis to the evaluation of the system as a whole.
4. The proposed QE mark should assess all aspects of the ECCE setting, including health and safety and also educational elements within a single inspection framework.

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5. Assessment must have the dual function of acknowledging the positive elements, as well as identifying and planning around the weaker elements within the setting.
6. A professional code of practice is important to define and formalise the activities of the Inspectorate for all stakeholders in education.
7. Oral and written feedback is important to ensure that there is transparency and communication, leading to an improvement in areas highlighted as being deficient, and continued good practice in positive aspects of the setting.
8. Appropriate staff-pupil ratios are an important characteristic of quality services.

Supporting Quality:

1. Opportunities for internal planning within settings are imperative to ensure that quality services are provided.
2. The role of the State provides a structure and a vision for the attainment of quality and it plays an important role in relation to the curriculum, assessment, institutional management, training of teachers and facilitating planning.
3. Funding is a prerequisite of attaining quality.
4. Support services for ECCE personnel are essential to enhance their ability in the delivery of quality service (e.g. psychological and guidance services).
5. Accurate and current information on all children in the form of databases, especially for those with special needs, is imperative to ensure quality services are provided to all those in need and that there are appropriate follow-up services as the child progresses and matures.
6. The coordination of the education system is seen as an important element in ensuring services of a high quality.
7. The transition from preschool to primary is an important milestone for children and adequate supports must be provided to ensure this is facilitated without unnecessary stress.
8. The provision of opportunities for education, training and ongoing professional development is a prerequisite of quality services. A national qualifications framework with clear pathways of progression needs to be implemented.
9. The proposed QE inspection system should contain a supportive aspect to assist services in their quest to attain quality.

4.5 Department of Health and Children (DHC)

Traditionally, the Department of Health was involved in the provision of ECCE for targeted groups by the funding of health board nurseries (Hayes, 1983). This primarily focused on children affected by disadvantage and grants were provided for the purchase of equipment and also for the

annual running costs of such services (NDP/CSF, 2003:94). In 1990, the Department of Health published *Needs and Abilities – A Policy for the Intellectually Disabled* (DoH, 1990). This report places emphasis on the importance of early intervention and the need to support parents and families of a child with an intellectual disability. In general, such supports are to be provided

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within the home where feasible and in addition, attendance at a preschool from age three is cited as an important intervention. The transition from the preschool to a primary or special school is noted as a significant development in the child's life, that must be supported by close liaison with all the agencies and the family involved.

With the introduction of the **Child Care Act** (DoH, 1991), the Department received a legislative framework within which to operate with ECCE services. Part VII (Articles 49-58) of the Act relates to preschool services, while Article 55 authorised the Department to:

...make such examination into the condition of the premises and the care and attention which the pre-school children are receiving...
(DoH, 1991:Section 55)

The provisions of the *Child Care Act* (1991) relating to ECCE services were given effect by virtue of the **Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations** (DoH, 1996a). The Regulations apply to preschools, playgroups, day nurseries, crèches, childminders looking after three or more children and similar services catering for children aged birth to six.

The Regulations elucidate the requirements for services in relation to a quality environment and health and safety issues, including staff-child ratios, space afforded per child, ventilation, lighting and insurance requirements. In addition, Article 4 states that providers:

...shall ensure that every preschool child attending the service has suitable means of expression and development through the use of books, toys, games and other play materials, having regard to his or her age and development." (DoH, 1996a:8)

Services are obliged to notify health boards of their existence and following an initial inspection, settings are usually inspected on an annual basis. Services who have not voluntarily notified are also subject to inspection from Department of Health and Children officials, focusing on the following:

Inspection is designed to ensure the health, safety and welfare of children and the promotion of their development. It also is to ensure compliance with statutory requirements. (DHC, 1998:41)

Following the implementation of the 1996 Regulations and the focus placed on quality of services, the Western Health Board (WHB) produced **A Guide to Quality Practice in Preschool Services** (WHB, 2000). This focuses on all aspects of quality in preschool services and provides a practical guide to their implementation. The Preschool Regulations are currently under review and the outcome of this process is expected shortly. In a personal correspondence from the Department of Health and Children, it was stated that "*It is proposed that the revised Regulations will place a stronger emphasis on child development.*" (Childcare Policy Unit, DHC, Personal Communication, 15th March, 2004)

In 1996, the Department of Health published **Towards an Independent Future**, relating to the health and personal social services for people with physical and sensory disabilities (DoH, 1996b). This places a special emphasis on early detection and intervention and the coordination of services for young children with disabilities. Early detection ranges from services within maternity hospitals, to public health nursing and services to detect any developmental difficulties in children within the preschool or school system. Supports for parents and families of children with disabilities, "*...particularly those aged under two...*" (DoH, 1996b:41)

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is also recommended. The provision of appropriate playgroup facilities, providing “...intensive early therapy services for children...” (DoH, 1996b:53) and their families are also considered vital in early intervention.

The DHC was the lead agency in the production of the **National Children’s Strategy – Our Children, Their Lives** (DHC, 2000). It provides a framework for Ireland regarding children and young people and follows from the ratification by Ireland in 1992 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). It aspires to “...enhance the status and further improve the quality of life of Ireland’s children” (DHC, 2000:6) and outlines a number of strategies for the realisation of these objectives. The vision of the *National Children’s Strategy* is as follows:

An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential. (DHC, 2000:10)

This vision incorporates three national goals:

1. Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
2. Children’s lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.
3. Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development (DHC, 2000:11).

Specifically relating to the quality of

childcare services, Objective A of the Strategy relates to the provision of high quality childcare for all children:

Children’s early education and developmental need will be met through quality childcare services and family-friendly employment measures. (DHC, 2000:50)

It further elaborates on this objective, outlining the multiple positive effects of high quality ECCE services for all children, with special emphasis placed on the benefits to those with special needs and those affected by disadvantage (DHC, 2000:51)

In 2001, the DHC made funding available to introduce a voluntary notification scheme for childminders looking after three or less children (outside the remit of the 1996 Regulations) in their homes. Upon notification, they receive the support of the local childminder’s advisory officer, who performs a multiplicity of tasks in supporting and enhancing the quality of the services provided (Childcare Policy Unit, DHC, Personal Communication, 15th March, 2004).

The NCO was established in 2001 to improve all aspects of children’s lives by leading and supporting the implementation of the *National Children’s Strategy*. The first major policy document of the NCO is **Ready, Steady Play – A National Play Policy** (NCO, 2004), following on from the recommendations within the National Children’s Strategy:

The National Play Policy is about creating better play opportunities for children. Its overall objective is to plan for an increase in public play facilities and thereby improve the quality of life of children living in Ireland by providing them with more play opportunities. (NCO, 2004:8)

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The Play Policy cites the important investment in childcare under the EOCP, "...with a significantly enhanced focus on the quality of these services." (NCO, 2004:10) However, it also outlines the lack of available data on play opportunities for children cared for by childminders outside the Preschool Regulations. In addition, the opportunities for play afforded with primary schools are examined and there is a recommendation that such opportunities be developed (NCO, 2004:25). Within its

eight objectives, *Ready, Steady, Play* also offers a framework for the actions needed and the agencies responsible to ensure that quality is achieved in play facilities for children.

Additionally, the NCO facilitates a High Level Interdepartmental Working Group, which addresses issues of coordination between education and care and between government departments.

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - DHC

Defining Quality:

1. The health and safety of the environment of the child is of paramount importance in ensuring a quality service is provided, including space per child, lighting and ventilation.
2. High staff-child ratios are an important aspect of ensuring quality within services.
3. Opportunities for the child to develop in a holistic way within settings are imperative through the provision of appropriate materials and possibilities for interaction.
4. National policy underpinning and promoting the position of children in society greatly assists practical implementation of initiatives in relation to ECCE and ensures such issues remain on the political agenda.
5. Providing opportunities for children to experience a broad range of play experiences greatly improves the quality of life for children.

Assessing Quality:

1. A legislative framework is a necessity for an inspection system to ensure compliance with the regulations prescribed.
2. The inspection system must evaluate all aspects of the setting, including the tangible structural aspects, as well as the more subtle and dynamic aspects, and must be applicable to all settings where children birth to six are present.

Supporting Quality:

1. Early intervention for children with special needs or those affected by disadvantage, both in the home and in preschool settings, is important for the achievement of quality within services.
2. Parents and families of children with special needs need to be supported to deal with the additional implications involved.
3. Transition from preschool to primary is a significant event in a child's life and must

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be supported by close cooperation and liaison between agencies and institutions.

4. Services outside the remit of the current regulations must be supported to ensure that all children are in receipt of a quality service.
5. It is important to have standardised and current data on the opportunities available to children to play in all areas.

4.6 Department of Social and Family Affairs (DSFA)

In 1998, the DSCFA⁵ published the **Report of the Commission on the Family - Strengthening Families for Life**. This was the culmination of a long process initiated in 1995, which incorporated the completion of related pieces of research in the intervening years to support the publication. The Commission on the Family was established in 1995 to “...make recommendations to government on proposals which would strengthen the capacity of families to carry out their functions in a changing economic and social environment.” (DSCFA, 1998:2) The Report viewed quality childcare as an integral element of supporting families, and childcare was raised as an issue in one-third of the 536 submissions received:

Quality childcare was often perceived to be vital to family life in that it supports the development, education, care and welfare of the

child, as well as provides support to mothers who have to undertake other commitments outside the home. (DSCFA, 1998:61)

Strengthening Families for Life cites the curriculum and the training and qualifications of staff as being integral elements of quality and recognises that “...quality early education experiences are valuable and important to all children,” citing benefits in relation to aspirations, motivation and commitment to schooling, as well as long-term benefits into adulthood (DSCFA, 1998:269). The Report is also forthright in its assertion that quality is not easily achieved and that a support infrastructure is a prerequisite of success in attaining quality services:

The Commission is of the view that inspection alone will not secure high standards. It would like to see the adoption of a supportive approach by the health boards alongside the inspection procedures. (DSCFA, 1998:250)

⁵ Up until 2002, this department was known as the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs (DSCFA).

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - DSCFA

Defining Quality:

1. The use of an appropriate curriculum or programme is an important aspect in attaining quality within settings.
2. The training and qualifications of staff are of paramount importance in ensuring a quality service for young children.

Policy Developments 1990-2004**Assessing Quality:**

1. Inspection alone will not ensure quality services. A system of supports to complement inspection must be implemented to ensure quality is achieved and maintained.

Supporting Quality:

1. The provision of quality childcare is an important element in the supports provided to families, including mothers working outside the home.

4.7 International Perspectives

European structural funds began filtering into the ECCE domain from the mid-1990s, largely framed within an equality perspective regarding female participation within the workforce. This financed projects such as the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) Programme and the dissemination of this funding was dependent on European guidelines. A number of international documents providing comparative reviews impinge directly on policy regarding quality in the Irish context. In 1992, Balaguer *et al.* produced ***Quality in Services for Young Children – A Discussion Paper***. The following aspects were highlighted as important in the attainment of quality:

- Policy;
- Legislation and standards;
- Financing and resourcing;
- Planning and monitoring;
- Advice and support;
- Staff training;
- Inspection of physical resources;
- Research and development;
- Integration and co-ordination of services (Balaguer *et al.*, 1992).

The report further acknowledges that the individual context of each country was of paramount importance in the interpretation and application of such aspects, yet all were significant in the attainment of quality.

In 1996, the European Commission Network on Childcare (1996) produced ***Quality Targets in Services for Young Children***, an outline of forty targets which it aspired would be achieved by most countries within a ten-year period. Within this document, quality is understood as a relative and subjective concept that cannot be defined succinctly but instead:

...should be seen as a dynamic and continuous process, involving regular review and never reaching a final, objective statement. (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996:7)

It further states regarding the definition of quality:

That process needs to be dynamic and continuous. It should also be multi-level, complex and democratic, because the process of definition needs to involve a wide range of groups with an interest in services for young children... (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996:8)

The importance of policy to support quality improvement is a recurrent theme of the publication, stating that “...high quality services accessible to all children can only be achieved with a national policy framework.” (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996:10) Other important elements in the achievement of quality include:

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- Coordination of responsibility for services;
- Curricular framework;
- Appropriate staffing and staff conditions;
- Appropriate physical environment;
- Infrastructure for planning, monitoring, support training, research and development;
- Adequate financing of services and infrastructure (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996:5).

This requires sustained public and political awareness and interest of the needs of children, parents and families. It outlines a number of components of quality applicable in the European context, including the following:

- Affordability;
- Access to services in all areas - urban and rural;
- Access to services for children with special needs;
- Combining safe and secure care with a pedagogical approach;
- Close and responsive relations between services and parents/communities;
- Diversity and flexibility of services;
- Increased choice for parents;
- Coherence between different services (European Commission Network on

Childcare, 1996:5).

In 2002, a comparative review of family policy, ***Contemporary Family Policy – A Comparative Review of Ireland, France, Germany, Sweden and the UK*** was produced (Daly and Clavero, 2002). It cites that childcare policy was not an issue in the Irish context until the mid-1990s, and then this was catalysed by economic as opposed to equality issues (Daly and Clavero, 2002:60). While the report deals with the issue of childcare, it does not specifically mention or discuss the term quality.

The OECD produced a comparative review, ***Babies and Bosses - Reconciling Work and Family Life in Austria, Ireland and Japan*** in 2003 (OECD, 2003). The provision of quality childcare is a core element in allowing parents to work and the report asserts that:

promoting child development and ensuring that childcare services are of good quality warrant additional public investment in childcare.
(OECD, 2003:12)

The report goes on to state the importance of quality in all countries, but especially in Ireland where the role of the informal childcare sector is significant vis-à-vis other jurisdictions (OECD, 2003:160).

Implications for the National Framework for Quality – International Perspectives

Defining Quality:

1. Legislation and a policy framework at national, regional and local level is important for the attainment of quality.
2. Planning is an essential component of ensuring services are of a high quality.
3. Staff training and qualifications are an important characteristic of quality services.
4. Services must remain integrated and coordinated to ensure there are no duplications and voids in services.

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5. It is important to acknowledge cultural variations in the definition, assessment and interpretation of quality.
6. Quality is a relative and subjective concept that should be seen as a dynamic and continuous process as opposed to a product.
7. An appropriate curricular framework is an inherent characteristic of a quality service.
8. The affordability of services is a component of quality in ensuring they are accessible to all children.
9. Quality is also impacted upon by the accessibility of services in all geographical areas, both urban and rural.
10. The quality of a service is also determined by its inclusion of children with special needs within the setting.
11. Parental and community links with the setting is a strong indicator of quality.
12. The ability for services to be flexible and to accommodate diversity is also an important characteristic of quality.

Assessing Quality:

1. The inspection of physical resources within settings is an important indicator of quality services.

Supporting Quality:

1. The financing and resourcing of the ECCE sector is imperative to ensure that quality in services is achieved.
2. Advice and support internally and from external sources is a vital support in ensuring quality services are achieved.
3. There is need for ongoing research and development to inform and underpin progress within ECCE services to ensure they remain dynamic and evolutionary.
4. The support of quality is particularly important in the Irish context where the informal childcare sector is particularly large in international terms.

4.8 Policies Relating to Non-Statutory Agencies

The non-statutory element of ECCE in Ireland had remained under resourced and consequently, underdeveloped for many years in Ireland. The economic changes as outlined earlier catalysed the development of the sector and there has been a myriad of activity by a multiplicity of organisations and agencies in recent years. The infrastructure relating to much of the ECCE sector is in its infancy at present, and thus, while there is much activity in relation to quality, there is a scarcity of documented

policy publications at this time. Many organisations are in the process of producing such documents but they are as yet not complete for inclusion in this review (see Table 1, page 5).

This section begins by documenting the policies of the NVCOs, followed by a brief overview of policies emanating from the community sector. Due to the diverse array of organisations involved both directly and indirectly with ECCE, it is not feasible within the confines of this review to include all policies produced on ECCE in the past fourteen years. The most prominent, those utilised widely and with universal

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application, which will assist the devising of the NFQ, have been prioritised within this review.

4.8.1 National Voluntary Childcare Organisations

The **National Children's Nurseries Association** (NCNA) was established to promote high standards of quality childcare in Ireland. The organisation realises this aim through a multitude of activities, including education of owners, staff, parents and legislators, dissemination of information and supporting practitioners (NCNA, 2003a:2). In the past decade, the NCNA has produced numerous publications pertaining to quality. **Quality Nursery Care for your Child** (NCNA, 1990) was revised in 1997 (NCNA, 1997) and was followed in 1998 by **Towards Quality Daycare** (NCNA, 1998), all of which are detailed in Section 5. The NCNA outlined its policy in relation to the provision of after-school care in its publication **After School – The Way Forward** (NCNA, 2000a). This publication outlines a number of important elements for the provision of a quality service including putting children first, providing a sense of belonging, creating the right environment, giving children choices, reconciling family life with after school provision and the right of children to play (NCNA, 2000a:5-7).

The NCNA, in conjunction with a number of the other national voluntary organisations, produced **Guidelines for the Protection of Children in Early Childhood Services** (NCNA, 2000b). These guidelines support settings to make sure quality practice in relation to the welfare and protection of children is achieved. The NCNA has been instrumental in supporting quality from a variety of perspectives and produced **We Like this Place - Guidelines for Best Practice in the Design of Childcare Facilities** (NCNA, 2002a). This publication outlines the salient features of the layout of a quality

setting for its members, incorporating information on indoor and outdoor design and provides full information from site acquisition to the layout and equipping of the setting. The importance of achieving the correct design and layout is reiterated throughout:

Greater awareness as to what constitutes good quality childcare has led to increasing recognition of the influence and contribution that the design and layout of premises play in the provision of quality care of children aged 0-14 years. (NCNA, 2002a:1)

In 2003, **Towards Quality Daycare – Minimum Quality Standards in a Nursery** (NCNA, 2003b) was published to promote quality among daycare providers. It outlines a number of aspects to support the attainment of quality within services, including management issues, staffing and qualifications, the environment, activities/programme for children, partnership with families, food and nutrition and the following of policies and procedures (NCNA, 2003b). The NCNA also disseminated a code of **Ethical Practice Guidelines** to its members to support quality interactions within the childcare setting and to act as a guide when personnel are in doubt regarding ethical issues (NCNA, 2003c).

IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation is the largest voluntary organisation working for young children and their families in Ireland, committed to promoting quality play-based ECCE. In 1998, it produced a **Position Paper for the National Forum on Early Childhood Care and Education** (IPPA, 1998). Within this, priority is placed on the importance of a curriculum for all children, the need to standardise training and qualifications and for increased professionalisation of the sector, the crucial impact of parental and community partnership and the need to achieve greater coordination in ECCE structures. The need

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for a national policy framework to achieve these objectives is also cited:

There is clearly a need for the development of a national policy and mechanisms at local and regional level for the effective and efficient delivery of early childhood care and education. (IPPA, 1998:23)

The IPPA also produced a **Quality Discussion Paper** in 2001 (IPPA, 2001), which was revised and reissued in 2002 (IPPA, 2002a). This outlines the IPPA policy in relation to quality in Ireland, which is viewed in a holistic context. The IPPA are adamant that quality as opposed to quantity should form the basis of national childcare policy. The organisation is also aware of the dynamic and subjective nature of quality and that this is influenced at societal, policy and practice levels, as is evidenced by the following statements:

Defining quality is a process of ongoing critical analysis, reflective practice and meaning making. (IPPA, 2002a:4)

Quality is subjective because it relates to the values and beliefs of the stakeholders within a social and cultural context. (IPPA, 2002a:12)

Quality by its nature is dynamic and continuous. (IPPA, 2002a:17)

This process of defining quality must take place in the national context and it is a process that requires the search for answers to difficult questions, the process of which is instrumental in attaining quality. The IPPA perceive the DES proposed intervention as being a 'top-down model,' the DJELR as an 'outside perspective' and instead propose a bottom-up approach in relation to quality by considering the child's experience within the service. The core values of the IPPA since its inception are now proposed as indicators of quality, including:

- The recognition of the importance of childhood;
- The central role of play;
- The key role of adults in supporting development and learning;
- The vital role of training;
- Partnership with parents and community. (IPPA, 2002a:9)

The IPPA acknowledge that in relation to training and qualifications, "...the baseline in Ireland appears extremely low as the majority of staff have no accredited qualification..." (IPPA, 2002a:10) It further points out that there is a need for recognition of the fact that there is a "...wide chasm between minimum standards and quality attainment" (IPPA, 2002a:11) and that minimum standards cannot be perceived or interpreted as quality. The IPPA outlines the static (health and hygiene, safety, space allocation, ratios, training and qualifications, equipment, policies and procedures) and dynamic elements (unique relationships and interactions) of quality, recognising both are interrelated and valid (IPPA, 2002a:13) These will be treated in greater depth in the practice section when the IPPA Quality Improvement Programme (QIP) is detailed.

The assurance of such quality is seen from an assessment or developmental approach, depending on whether it is the static or dynamic variables being assessed. The IPPA believe that working towards quality is an ongoing process and further that:

dynamic elements of quality cannot be imposed. There is no defined standard, no final destination but rather movement in the right direction. (IPPA, 2002a:13)

The IPPA outline core constituents of quality from the point of view of children, from the perspective of the setting, of the management and of the staff (IPPA, 2002a:15-16). The publication concludes with recommendations for the

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improvement of quality by paying special attention to the following four areas:

- Diversity
- Training
- Specialist support
- Capacity building (IPPA, 2002a:20-21).

The IPPA also disseminated **Guidelines on Policies for Preschool Services** (IPPA, 2002b) to its members. This is a support to services that are in the process of developing or reviewing their policies and procedures and provides sample policies for adaptation to the needs of individual settings.

Childminding Ireland produced **Choosing Childcare – Solving our Childcare Problems** (Murray, 1993). In this, the characteristics of the childminder leading to a quality service are outlined, including sensitivity, availability, patience, support, security, discipline, practicality, trust, sense of humour and training (Murray, 1993:19-25). This was followed in 2001 by **The Childminding Handbook** (Murray, 2001) as a support to childminders in achieving a quality service:

The objective of the book is to explore the issues leading to quality in family childcare relationship and the environment where children may spend long hours. (Murray, 2001:13)

This publication places great emphasis on the intrinsic qualities of the individual childminder, as due to the nature of the work, childminding often involves one adult working alone with a child or group of children. As Murray (2001:45) states:

Quality in Childminding is related to qualities in the person providing the care, but quality is also related to the nature of the relationship between the children's parents and the Childminder.

The **Border Counties Childcare Network** (BCCN) produced a booklet on **Out Door Play: Designs and Benefits** (BCCN, 2002). This outlines the characteristics of quality outdoor play under the following headings:

- A broad balanced curriculum reflecting all aspects of child development;
- Free flow access between indoor and outdoor play areas;
- Indoor and outdoor play planned and linked together;
- Adults playing a major role through observation and quality interaction;
- Equal access to outdoor play provision for boys and girls;
- Allowing access out of doors all year round;
- Allowing access for children with special needs;
- Providing opportunities for challenge and problem-solving;
- Adult and child responsibility for the equipment, behaviour etc.;
- Discussion and planning with children to provide a greater understanding and promote ideas from children (BCCN, 2002:15-16).

Barnardos has also been active in relation to the production of publications relating to quality in a variety of settings. It has produced a number of guides for the establishment of a quality childcare service (Canavan and Gibbons, 1997; O'Sullivan and Gibbons, 1997) and to assist services in the recruitment of quality personnel (Barnardos and ADM, 1999; Byrne, 2002). These outline background issues such as relevant legislation, the selection and recruitment process and also the management and supervision of personnel in their new position (Barnardos, 1999; 2002; Dowd, 2002). **Get it Right: A Parent's Guide to Choosing Quality Daycare** provide insights for parents in how to choose a quality childcare setting for their children. Dowd (2000) outlines

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the core characteristics of quality childcare as incorporating opportunities for the following:

- To develop understanding of the world around them;
- To form consistent, loving relationships;
- To explore and experiment;
- To engage in activities which encourage physical development;
- To enjoy learning through play;
- To negotiate obstacles and conflict;
- To celebrate effort and mastery of new skills;
- To practise new skills
- To develop a positive sense of self;
- Learning how to learn (Dowd, 2000:5).

Dowd (2000) proposes that the quality of a service can be determined by a number of criteria upon which the child's interactions with adults and other children depend, the opportunities for new experiences and the ability to cope with different environments are central. Other criteria include the quality of the following elements:

- Staff;
- Policies and procedures;
- Curriculum;
- Play;
- Provision for children with special needs;
- Parental involvement;
- Discipline;
- Diversity (Dowd, 2000:6-9).

Canavan (2000) ***Quality Childcare in the Workplace – A Step-by-Step Guide for Employers*** outlines strategies and provides exemplars for employers providing quality childcare services in the workplace. French (2000), superseded by French (2003), provides a comprehensive guide to ***Supporting Quality*** (French, 2003) in the Irish context. This details supports in regard to early childhood

services to ensure quality on issues such as:

- Policies and procedures;
- Management;
- Human resources;
- Partnership with families and community;
- Child-centred environment;
- Curriculum;
- Observations and assessment and behaviour management;
- Health and safety (French, 2003).

The **St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland (SNMSI)** issued ***Guidelines for Montessori Schools*** (SNMSI, n.d.). These guidelines place great emphasis on the "Prepared Environment," both indoor and outdoors, in line with the teachings and philosophy of Maria Montessori. They also delineate the materials and subject areas for activities to be conducted in Montessori schools. The guidelines are currently under review and a revised edition is expected shortly.

Pavee Point is a partnership of Irish Travellers and settled people working together to improve the lives of Irish Travellers through working towards social justice, solidarity, socio-economic development and human rights (Pavee Point, Accessed at: http://www.paveepoint.ie/pav_about_a.html, 8th June, 2004). The organisation has produced many policy documents relating to ECCE in Ireland, most notably ***Éist – Respecting Diversity in Early Childhood Care, Education and Training*** (Murray and O'Doherty, 2001). This document outlines the challenges of embracing diversity in the Irish context and the importance of an anti-bias approach to ensure a quality experience for all:

In accordance with the principles of quality in early years provision, all services for children need to put equality policies in place which

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protect children against discrimination in accordance with the grounds identified in the new equal status legislation. (Murray and O'Doherty, 2001:79)

ordinating and supervising play and play personnel throughout the hospital. (Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital Ireland, 1993:8)

In addition, the importance of training for management, staff and parents is emphasised in order to implement the anti-bias approach. The Report acknowledges the complexity of achieving such an approach, making recommendations to government, to training, accreditation and certification bodies, to early years providers and voluntary childcare organisations as well as a number of general recommendations.

Children in Hospital Ireland (CHI) promotes the welfare of sick children by drawing attention to their special needs for emotional security. In 1993, when it was known as the Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital (Ireland), it published its report, ***Play for Child Patients in Irish Hospitals*** (Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital Ireland, 1993). It makes a number of recommendations regarding play facilities in hospitals, play personnel, financing of play and the types of play provided to ensure a quality play experience for the child. Regarding staffing, the report states:

The play should be organised by a qualified hospital Play Specialist who would be responsible for co-

An Outline Guide for the Provision of Healthcare Services to Children and Young People was issued in 2002 (CHI, 2002a). This outlines 52 points of interest for the care of children in a hospital setting. Collectively, these will ensure that the time spent in hospital is as stress-free and beneficial to the needs of the child as possible. Some of the topics reviewed include play, recreation and leisure activities, education, children with special educational needs and children with disabilities.

Later in 2002, it published a ***Charter for Children in Hospital***, incorporating ten articles focusing on the needs and rights of children. Article seven is of particular relevance for this review, stating that:

Children shall have full opportunity for play, recreation and education suited to their age and condition and shall be in an environment designed, furnished, staffed and equipped to meet their needs. (CHI, 2002b:20)

The charter further stresses the importance of appropriate play materials for all children, the provision of suitably qualified staff and the nature of the architecture and interior design of the environment.

Implications for the National Framework for Quality – Non-Statutory Agencies

Defining Quality:

1. The interests and well-being of the child are of primary importance in the attainment of quality.
2. The environment of the child is a significant contributor to quality.
3. Affording children choices in the type of activities they pursue is an important feature of quality.

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4. Policies and procedures must be in place and followed to ensure that children are protected and their welfare is promoted within services.
5. The design of settings, both indoor and outdoor, has an important contribution to make in attaining quality.
6. The effective management of a setting is an important feature of a quality service.
7. Staff training and qualifications is an important feature of quality
8. The provision of an appropriate programme/curriculum or activities for children is a key characteristic of quality.
9. Partnership with parents and families is an inherent aspect of quality.
10. The provision of appropriate and nutritional food within settings is an important feature of quality.
11. Greater coordination and cooperation between those involved with ECCE, at national, local and regional level, is an important element of quality.
12. Quality is a subjective and dynamic term that must be constantly revised in light of evolutionary developments.
13. Opportunities for play, both indoors and outdoors, are a central element in the provision of a quality service for young children.
14. The traits or characteristics of personnel, especially where children spend a long period of time with one person, are a fundamental indicator of quality.
15. Inclusion of all children in services, in a non-discriminatory way, is an important feature of quality.
16. An anti-bias approach to ECCE services is an important characteristic of embracing diversity and preventing discrimination.

Assessing Quality:

1. Quality can be assessed in a number of ways, including 'top-down', by outsiders or by a 'bottom-up' perspective.
2. The static and dynamic variables of quality are both valid and interrelated when assessing quality.
3. There is a significant difference between minimum standards and a quality service. Minimum standards cannot be interpreted as quality.

Supporting Quality:

1. The education of all stakeholders in the ECCE arena is an important constituent of attaining high quality services, including providers, parents, personnel and policy makers.
2. Quality cannot be imposed but must be supported to ensure services move in the right direction.

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4.8.2 Other Organisations

The **National Disability Authority** (NDA) promotes and helps secure the rights of people with disabilities of all ages in Ireland. As part of this brief, the NDA prepared a **Submission to Childcare/Preschool (Services) Regulations 1996 and (Amendment) Regulations 1997 Review Group**. It outlines the crucial nature of appropriate early intervention for children with special needs on their future development:

Early experiences of inclusion or exclusion are crucial in shaping the future participation of people with disabilities. (NDA, 2002a:2)

The NDA make a number of recommendations based on its submission to enhance the quality of services for children with disabilities, including the appropriate provision of or attention to the following:

- Adult-child ratios;
- Record keeping;
- Premises and facilities;
- Inspection;
- Assessment;
- Equal status / Discrimination;
- Fees (NDA, 2002a:4-6).

The **Combat Poverty Agency** (CPA) has a brief “...to work for the prevention and decrease of poverty and social exclusion and the reduction of inequality in Ireland”. (CPA, 1998a:1) In their 1998 pre-budget submission to the Minister of Social, Community and Family Affairs, **Investing in Children**, they highlighted their belief that “...all children have a right to quality childcare” (CPA, 1998a:6) due to the key role that it can play in “...combating educational disadvantage among children, facilitating labour market participation by women and alleviating family stress and social isolation. (CPA 1998a:6) They called for appropriate training and regulation of

all childcare facilities and the development of “...guidelines in relation to minimum health and safety standards for use by both providers and users” (CPA, 1998a:6).

The CPA, in its **Position Paper for the National Forum for Early Childhood Education**, outlines the important role quality ECCE plays in combating exclusion and disadvantage (CPA, 1998b:5). The CPA calls for additional resources to increase the quality of ECCE provision, including improved adult-child ratios, utilisation of improved curricular and pedagogic approaches and enhanced integration of policy. In its recommendations, the CPA calls for ECCE services to be child-centred, of a high quality, accessible, flexible and culturally appropriate (CPA, 1998b:8).

This theme has been repeated in subsequent submissions to government. In 2001, the CPA published a **Summary of Proposals to the National Anti-Poverty Strategy Review**. In relation to educational disadvantage, a key target was that “ *All children should have access to quality early education before entering primary school.*” (CPA, 2001:9) A priority action towards achieving this target was identified as the need to “*Ensure that current and future provision is child-centred, of a high quality, well resourced and with appropriately trained staff and good adult child ratios.*” (CPA, 2001:9)

The **Irish National Teachers’ Organisation** (INTO) is the union of primary teachers in Ireland. It produces many policy documents relating to primary schools, thus impacting on the infant classes and early childhood education. The publications reviewed here are those that have specific remit for the infant classes as opposed to general publications. Recent years have witnessed an increased focus on policy issues for ECCE. In 1995, the INTO produced **Early Childhood Education – Issues and Concerns** (INTO, 1995). This explored many of the contemporary issues in ECCE at the time such as

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educational disadvantage, the curriculum, play, the role of parents and teacher education (both pre-service and in-service).

The INTO prepared a submission for the National Forum for Early Childhood Education in 1998, ***A Perspective on Early Childhood Education*** (INTO, 1998). This placed great emphasis on the role of the teacher in early childhood education, the importance of an appropriate curricular framework and the crucial nature of teacher education:

The quality of any sector of the educational service is to a large extent determined by the quality of the teacher and a prime contributor to the quality of the teacher is the professional preparation that is provided, especially during pre-service. (INTO, 1998:9)

The INTO concludes by making a number of recommendations on the following salient features:

Highly qualified teachers, an abundance of appropriate materials and equipment, suitable facilities, a child centred curriculum, and low teacher pupil ratio are prerequisites of high quality early childhood education. (INTO, 1998:22)

In 2000, the INTO and St. Patrick's College of Education hosted an early childhood conference, the proceedings of which was published as ***Early Years Learning*** (INTO, 2000). Similar themes emerged from this conference such as the role of the teacher, the importance of the curriculum and appropriate methodologies, the pre-service training and ongoing professional development of teachers, adult-child ratios in the infant classroom, educational disadvantage and the provision for children with special needs in the early years (INTO, 2000).

Aontas promotes the development of a

quality and comprehensive system of adult learning and education. In 2003, it published ***Childcare and Adult Education*** (Aontas, 2003). While it welcomes the focus on quality provision through staffing and capital grants, it believes that the EOCP does not allow flexibility and thus does not adequately support the needs of people receiving training or returning to work. It subsequently makes recommendations for the improvement of childcare to meet Aontas aims and objectives.

The **Ballyfermot Partnership** published ***The ABC Plan – Action for Ballyfermot Childcare*** (Ballyfermot Partnership, 2000). It places quality as a core issue in the Ballyfermot area, lamenting the fact that quality is not always achieved in the area:

There is little quality control in the area. The enforcement of quality standards is particularly important in Ballyfermot/Cherry Orchard as the quality of provision is often inferior in disadvantaged areas. (Ballyfermot Partnership, 2000:39)

It also cites the training and qualifications of staff as a core constituent of quality and makes a number of recommendations in this regard:

Good quality training is essential if childcare services are to be of high quality and respond to the needs of their users. (Ballyfermot Partnership, 2000:37)

The **Irish Congress of Trade Unions** (ICTU) carried out a study into childcare practices among its members, ***Identifying Members' Childcare Needs*** (ICTU, 2002). While the survey dealt largely with the costs and availability of childcare facilities, quality was also seen as an important element:

Ensuring high standards of

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childcare is of concern to Congress and working parents, high quality childcare provision makes a real contribution to children developing their potential while poor quality provision can be damaging. (ICTU, 2002:Foreword).

The **Cross-Border Rural Childcare Project** produced a report, **Quality in Services for Young Children in Rural Areas** (Hayes and Moore, 1998). This report discusses the complexity of defining quality and lists a number of perspectives from which it can be identified:

- The child development perspective;
- The government/regulatory perspective;
- The social service perspective;
- The parent perspective;
- The child perspective;
- The social policy funding perspective
- The staff perspective;
- The cultural perspective (Hayes and Moore, 1998:3-5).

The report further identifies complexities in the attainment of quality in the rural context that exist in addition to challenges in urban areas, including scattered populations, distance and transport problems, small services leading to high

staff turnover, low amount of support services, funding and inappropriate national policies for rural areas (Hayes and Moore, 1998:8-9).

In May 2004, **Planet Childcare Policy Group**, which represents the Partnerships, published **Community Childcare Services in Disadvantaged Areas - Current Review and Future Recommendations**. This publication was compiled to present the results of a survey of community childcare facilities which, “...raise concerns about what it sees as a potential crisis in community childcare” (Planet, 2004:1). The document is primarily concerned with the sustainability of community childcare on foot of the possible removal of their main source of income, i.e. Community Employment schemes and the EOCP grant aid. They make the argument that the value of community childcare should be recognised as a cost effective family support mechanism with wide ranging potential in this regard. In addition, it cites the potential of the partnership companies to develop an overall quality framework for childcare that would harness the expertise that has accumulated within the community childcare services. This, it is envisaged, could be achieved through collaboration with the CECDE. (Planet, 2004:6)

Implications for the National Framework for Quality – Other Organisations

Defining Quality:

1. High adult-child ratios are an important characteristic of quality services
2. The importance of record-keeping within services is seen as being an important element of quality.
3. The quality of premises and facilities impacts on the quality of the services.
4. Equal access to services by all children and their families is an inherent characteristic of quality.
5. Affordability for all, including those with special needs and affected by disadvantage, is a key element in providing a quality service.

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6. The curriculum or programme followed, as well as the methodologies employed within services impacts on the quality of the service provided.
7. Parental involvement is a key characteristic of quality.
8. The training and qualifications of personnel, both at pre-service and in-service level, has an important bearing on the quality of the service provided.
9. Quality childcare must be flexible to meet the needs of parents and families accessing training or employment outside the home.
10. Quality is a subjective concept and can be viewed from a multiplicity of perspectives depending on the stakeholder or the objectives in question.
11. The availability of appropriate materials and equipment to enhance child development is an important feature of quality.

Assessing Quality:

1. The inspection and assessment of services is an important element in ensuring quality within service provision.

Supporting Quality:

1. High quality childcare is a necessity in all areas, regardless of socio-economic disadvantage or other adverse conditions.
2. Quality needs to be supported in different ways and to differing degrees in various areas, including rural and urban areas.

Section 5

Practice Developments 1990 - 2004

5.1 Introduction

This section of the report reviews current practice related to the establishment and promotion of quality in ECCE settings in Ireland. The preceding section has reviewed the policy context for this practice and therefore the focus of this discussion will include how policy has translated into the practice of defining, assessing and supporting quality in ECCE.

The review considers government and non-government initiatives separately. This is done to provide a structure for the review of the materials and does not reflect the nature of practice. The level of interaction and flow of information between these two arenas is significant and has been influential in the development of quality initiatives over the period under consideration.

5.2 Perspectives on Quality

As has already been discussed, quality has been addressed in policy terms from multiple perspectives. This is equally true of practice initiatives. Three key perspectives can be identified which have influenced the quality of practice in ECCE. These are:

- Statutory or legislative - e.g. reflects the statutory responsibilities of the DHC and DES to implement minimum standards for the operation of Pre-school services.

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- Practitioner/ provider – reflects the needs and concerns of those actively engaged in delivering early childhood services.
- Education and training – reflects the position that the quality of personnel, especially in terms of their education and training, directly influences the nature, and quality of practice.

These perspectives are related and interlinked and all of the above may have influenced any one practice initiative. However it is useful to identify them as distinct as they each have exercised unique influences on the quality of practice in ECCE.

5.3 Defining, Assessing and Supporting Quality - Statutory Perspectives

As has been outlined in the policy section, key responsibility for ECCE service provision is spread across, in the main, three government departments. These are the DES, the DHC and the DJELR. The role that each play in the development of quality practice in ECCE is outlined below.

5.4 Department of Education and Science

In 1990, a *Report of the Primary Education Review Body* (DoE, 1990a), which had been established in 1988, identified the factors upon which effective primary education depends. As previously outlined in the policy section, these included the suitability of the curriculum, the competence and commitment of teachers, effective management, parental involvement and home-school links. (DoE, 1990a:31).

A number of these issues were elaborated

on in detail and the report concluded with one hundred and seven recommendations many of which were concerned with the improvement of quality practice in primary education. In 1994, a *National Education Convention* was convened to deliberate on the changing nature of Irish society and the type of education system that was required to meet the challenges of such change (Coolahan, 1994). In the report of this convention, a chapter dedicated to the issue of quality reflected upon practice in primary schools and made some interesting observations on 'good practice' in a number of areas (See Section 4).

School planning was highlighted as an essential step towards improving quality in education. However, the following caveat was issued, which illustrates the tone of the report in general:

Should school plans be envisaged as final documents which rarely change and only occasionally reviewed, their influence on school improvement may be marginal. Systematic evaluation of school practices needs to be conducted on a regular basis. In this way incremental improvements can be made and quality can be improved. (Coolahan, 1994:56)

It was further observed that school plans needed to contain specific targets and criteria, "...if only because they (staff) will not receive precise feedback on their efforts. Success will be difficult to identify and stagnation rather than development could follow". (Coolahan, 1994:58)

Both the 1990 publication and the 1994 report support the premise that quality improvements in education could only be effected if clear and unambiguous targets were established, if these were disseminated to all those involved in the achievement of those targets and if adequate support mechanisms accompanied these targets.

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It is uncertain to what extent the recommendations of both these reports were implemented as no follow up documentation is available. However it is possible to establish that there are four central aspects to the role that the DES plays in defining assessing and supporting quality practice in ECCE. These are curriculum development, inspection of schools, teacher education and support, and targeted initiatives.

5.4.1 Curriculum

The impact of the curriculum on the practice of teachers is extremely difficult to establish, as there is very little national research in this regard. Within the period under consideration in this review, two national primary curricula exert influence. The first, formulated in 1971 was known as the **New Curriculum** (DoE, 1971) while the second and current Primary School Curriculum, commonly known as the **Revised Curriculum** (DES, 1999b), was first introduced in 1999. Teachers receive the curriculum through a set of handbooks, which outline the aims and objectives of the curriculum in general, and then by each subject area. Recommended teaching methodologies are also outlined with examples of good practice. The 1971 curriculum Teacher Handbook (DoE, 1971) consists of two volumes, which identifies the following curricular areas; Religion, Language (Irish and English), Mathematics, Art and Craft activities, Social and Environmental Studies, Music and Physical Education (DoE, 1971:20). The Revised Curriculum of 1999 consists of 23 volumes addressing the following curriculum areas; Language, Mathematics, SESE, Arts Education, Physical Education and SPHE.

In 1990, the **Review Body on the Primary Curriculum** (DoE, 1990b) reported on the nature and implementation of the 1971 Curriculum and provided a useful picture of teaching practice in schools at that time. Detailed consideration

of the findings of this report are beyond the scope of this review. However, the evaluation of the operation and implementation of the curriculum against the five key principles “...on which the primary curriculum can be said to be based...” (DoE, 1990b:13) provides a valuable window on practice at this time. Before reviewing the findings it is worth noting that, “(T)he principles of the curriculum are not formally specified in the Teacher Handbook.” (DoE, 1990b:13) In other words, they are not listed in the document but have been extracted from it by the Review Body for the purposes of the evaluation.

These principles are:

1. Full and harmonious development – this reflects the belief that: “*All children are complex human beings with physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual needs and potentialities.*” (DoE, 1971, Vol. 1:13);
2. Due allowance for individual difference – emphasises the importance of curricular planning in relation to the unique individual needs of each child;
3. Activity and discovery methods –based upon the ‘*active nature of learning processes*’ (DoE, 1990b:13);
4. Integrated curriculum – recognises that learning does not happen in isolated areas of knowledge and activity; rather that each subject area is interrelated and interdependent;
5. Environment based learning – the environment is the most effective way of integrating various aspects of the total curriculum.

The Review Body conducted research with practicing teachers to establish levels of acceptance and implementation of these principles. In general, there was a high

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degree of acceptance of all the principles by teachers at all levels of the primary school. Whilst the level of implementation varied, a general trend was that implementation was more successful in the Junior classes than in the Senior classes where lessons became more didactic and subject-driven. The findings in relation to Principle 1 are also interesting:

...evidence suggests that teachers and inspectors saw greatest success in relation to cognitive and social development. There is less success in relation to aesthetic and creative development and to a lesser extent in relation to emotional and social development. (DoE, 1990b:14)

The Review Body identified a number of factors, which impinged on the successful delivery of the curriculum and indeed some of these go to the heart of the provision of high quality education:

- Poor dissemination of the curriculum – there was a serious lack of support in the form of information, and in-service training for teachers;
- Lack of resources and text books;
- Large class sizes;
- Post primary tests and other selection procedures skewed activities in senior classes of primary school (DoE, 1990b).

The Revised Curriculum was introduced in 1999 and the DES has taken on board a number of these issues and instigated initiatives to overcome them.

To ensure improved dissemination and implementation of the Revised Curriculum, the **Primary Curriculum Support Programme** (PCSP) was set up to plan and coordinate the 'roll out' of the curriculum, providing information and a programme of in-service to all schools through the:

- Promotion of ownership of the

curriculum by schools so that each child's educational experience is enriching, meaningful and relevant to his or her life;

- Adoption of a partnership approach to planning the support programme at national, regional and local level;
- Facilitation of quality in-career development events whereby teachers become familiar with the content, principles, teaching methodologies and assessment approaches of the curriculum;
- On-going evaluation of the support programme whereby future activities are informed and shaped accordingly;
- Encouragement for the development of school clusters and networks towards sharing best practice and developing learning communities;
- Accessibility of support and advice from the Primary Curriculum Support Programme personnel, personally and through ICTs. (PCSP, Accessed at: <http://www.pcsp.ie/> 28th May, 2004)

The national network of Education Centres (which had previously been established on a voluntary basis by teachers, from the early 1970's onwards, with a view to provide much needed support for their colleagues) play a central role in the PCSP and have been commissioned to carry out a broad range of support activities. These include information dissemination and to respond to the needs of schools and teachers at a local level. Another important element of the PCSP is the establishment of the Regional Curriculum Support Service and the recruitment of Cuiditheoirí:

The role of the Curriculum Cuiditheoir/Support Person is a broad one. Activities such as meeting with principals, groups of teachers, post-holders, individual teachers and/or whole staff, working with the teacher in the class and facilitating school and classroom curriculum planning is

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undertaken. ...facilitating exchange of ideas and dissemination of good practice between schools include(s) ...networking between schools, organising optional courses, establishing support groups in areas of special interest. (PCSP, Accessed at: <http://www.pcsp.ie/>, 10th June, 2004)

Post primary tests and selection procedures have been proscribed and a number of initiatives, including the recruitment and training of greater numbers of teachers, have been established to tackle the difficulties associated with large class sizes.

The Revised Curriculum of 1999 is still in its implementation phase. The NCCA are currently engaged in a review of the implementation of the Revised Curriculum:

... to increase our understanding of teachers' and children's experiences with the curriculum in their classrooms, to date. (NCCA, Accessed at: http://www.ncca.ie/j/index2.php?name=pcr_webpage, 24th May, 2004)

It is anticipated that the outcomes of this review will support the future development of quality provision in education.

5.4.2 Inspection of Schools

The present role of the Inspectorate of the DES is defined within the 1998 Education Act (DES, 1998) (see Section 4). In 2002, *A Brief Guide to the Inspectorate* was published to coincide with the "...major reorganisation of its structure and management, in order to serve better the needs of its many clients within the education system." (DES, 2002c:5). Within this publication the broad objectives of the Inspectorate are outlined as:

- To contribute to the evaluation of the education system;

- To contribute to the development of the education system;
- To contribute to the support of the education system. (DES, 2002c:7)

Annual programmes of inspection are carried out with the school system as follows:

- School inspections (usually carried out once every six years);
- Subject inspections and evaluations of programmes at second level;
- Inspection of the work of individual teachers, including probationary teachers;
- Focussed evaluations of particular aspects of the system (DES, 2002c).

Different models of external evaluation of schools exist at primary and secondary level. However this situation is being reviewed at present with the intention of producing a common model. At primary level, "...schools are inspected on a cyclical basis in line with annual inspection targets. A school report (*Tuairisc Scoile*) is furnished on a primary school on average every six years following a detailed school inspection." (DES, 2002c:10) The school evaluation includes all aspects of teaching, school management and planning, learning and assessment as well as the school environment in terms of accommodation and resources.

Teaching and the practice of individual teachers is inspected in accordance with the **Rules for National Schools**. (DoE, 1965b). However, this statement is qualified in the guide to the Inspectorate by the statement that "...much of this work relates to the evaluation and support of probationary teachers." (DES, 2002c:10)

It is difficult to establish exactly what the criteria for such teacher assessment are due to the fact that the last revised edition of the Rules for National Schools was issued in 1965 and since this date many revisions

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to the Rules have been made through DES circulars. In 1990, the Primary Education Review Body reported on this anomaly and observed:

In the absence of an up to date publication, incorporating all the current rules, there is difficulty establishing a coherent picture of the rules and regulations as they exist at present. (DoE, 1990:33).

On the basis of this observation, they recommended that a review and revision of the Rules for National Schools should be undertaken as a matter of urgency. This has not happened to date, and it is difficult therefore to understand how the Inspectorate and more importantly teachers, especially those qualified in more recent years, can successfully utilise the Rules for National Schools to review their own practice. In 1994, the **Report on the National Convention on Education** (Coolahan, 1994) also expressed some concern with regard to the inspection of teachers in schools:

Present practice with regard to inspection of teachers varies between primary and post primary as well as between the different school years in the latter case. In many cases the quality of teaching has to be inferred from questioning of the class by the inspector. Such practices can hardly be regarded as the most valid or defensible method of evaluating teacher performance. (Coolahan, 1994:63)

This report also highlighted the traditional inadequacy of preparation afforded to newly recruited inspectors and welcomed the “...improved induction programme being developed and a development programme aimed at those already in the system...” (Coolahan, 1994:64) which had already been established. Unfortunately it was not possible to identify or access information about the nature of these

programmes for this review.

Despite the fact that previous reports have generally observed that practice within the Junior and Senior classes in primary schools varies significantly (DoE, 1990), inspection of schools does not take such differences into account:

The Inspectorate does not use specific evaluation frameworks for particular classes but rather a generic framework for school evaluations. (DES Inspectorate, Personal Communication, 21st April, 2004)

This generic framework has recently been used as the basis for the development of **Looking at our School – An Aid to Self-evaluation in Primary Schools** (DES, 2003a). The evaluation document is structured around five themes:

- School management;
- School planning;
- Curriculum provision;
- Learning and teaching in curriculum areas;
- Support for pupils (DES, 2003a).

Each of these areas is divided into a number of aspects which represent the different activities collectively constituting the area of the school's operation to be evaluated. The aspects are further broken down into components for each of which a number of themes have been identified as a basis for evaluation. (DES, 2003a:ix).

The publication recognised that the unique context of each school, e.g. size, location, socio-economic circumstances of pupils, physical, material and human resources available etc., will impact on the work of the school, and advises that these should be taken into account when carrying out the evaluation process.

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This aid to self-evaluation is a valuable document and should prove to be of great assistance to schools and teachers as they strive to improve the quality of their provision and practice. It is cited as one of a number of publications being prepared, “...in support of all those engaged in the work of schools, with a view to improving quality and standards in the education of our children and young children.” (DES, 2003a:v). Such commitment on the part of the Inspectorate bodes extremely well for the future development of quality practice in primary schools in Ireland.

This evaluation framework builds on the earlier publication of a **Code of Practice on Evaluation and Reporting** (DES, 2000b), which “...sets out general principles and guidelines in accordance with which members of the Inspectorate engage in the process of evaluation and reporting” (DES, 2000b).

This document, in combination with the generic evaluation framework publication (DES, 2003a), should contribute to reducing inconsistencies in the inspection processes as has been highlighted by the INTO in their recent **Central Executive Committee Report** (INTO, 2004:84). In addition, it is reported that the DES intends to issue a guide to whole school evaluation in the Autumn 2004 that ...”would assist in the clarification and streamlining of matters.” (INTO, 2004:84)

5.4.2.1 Practice in schools

Another recent publication offers some small insight into the nature of the practice of the Inspectorate and indeed of practice in primary schools. **Fifty School Reports: What the Inspectors Say** (DES, 2002d) paints a positive picture of primary education on the whole. However, there is no disaggregation in this report of information on the junior and senior infant classes in schools and so it does not allow us to gain a clear picture of what practice actually looks like in these early childhood settings.

Despite these shortcomings, there are some interesting recommendations within the report which have resonance for early childhood practice; e.g. the need to improve parental involvement strategies and practice, the need to reduce reliance on text books and employ teaching methodologies which promote interaction of knowledge and integration of learning contexts. The need for more effective planning by teachers and management is also a recurrent theme and finally the need for sustained support services for the implementation of the curriculum and other policy change within the school is advocated.

5.4.2.2 Whole School Evaluation

In 1998 /1999, a pilot initiative was established to explore a new approach to enhancing quality in national schools. The purpose of the **Whole School Evaluation (WSE) Pilot Project** was to “...evaluate collaboratively the work of the school as a unit and to foster and promote the development of school activities as a whole.” (DES, 1999e:12)

The focus of WSE was:

- The quality of learning and teaching;
- The quality of school planning and;
- The quality of school management (DES, 1999e:12).

The implementation of the project comprised four incremental steps:

1. Pre-evaluation meetings between the school principal and the inspector, a general meeting with all staff and a meeting with representatives of the school Board of Management (including parent representatives). These meetings explained and clarified the WSE process;
2. School and classroom visits by the WSE team of inspectors;
3. Post-evaluation meetings – these involved the groups outlined in step 1

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- and gave detailed feedback on areas of strengths and weaknesses;
4. The WSE Report – These were intended to be a summary of the findings discussed at the post evaluation meetings (DES, 1999e).

The value of the WSE Pilot Project for this review lies in the fact that evaluation data on the impact of this initiative on practice was gathered and published as part of the process. This data was gathered by questionnaire and the findings revealed that, “*All types of respondents (teachers, principals, inspectors) reported positive experiences of the WSE project.*” (DES, 1999e:32) In particular, principals responded most positively to the initiative. When the responses are examined in more detail, the data reveals a number of interesting insights into the nature of the responses from participants. Of note was the view that teachers were “*...less positive about the likely impact of the WSE process on future development of the school than they were about the way in which the process was actually carried out.*” (DES, 1999e:24) This was interpreted to suggest that “*...the WSE process to be wholly successful should not be seen as a ‘stand-alone’ process, but would be better seen as part of an overall school development strategy.*” (DES, 1999e:24) Other interesting observations included the necessity for finding a suitable mechanism for discerning parent’s perspectives and also the fact that the views of children had not been gathered or considered in the WSE process. The outcome of this pilot initiative has been that the DES plans to extend the project taking on board the feedback from the pilot initiative.

5.4.2.3 Evaluation of Traveller Preschools

In 2000/1, the Inspectorate was commissioned to conduct an evaluation of Traveller Preschools, ***Preschools for Travellers: National Evaluation Report*** (DES, 2003b). These early childhood facilities were established

initially by community and voluntary organisations and later became recipients of support from the DES. The purpose of the evaluation was, “*...primarily to support good practice in the pre-schools.*” (DES 2003b:4) It examined management, accommodation and funding, issues concerned with staffing, the effectiveness of teaching and learning and the involvement of parents and other partners. The publication of such a detailed report by the Inspectorate on one type of early educational setting provides very important data on the nature of practice. In particular the evaluation of teaching and learning makes observations regarding the feature of the “*...most effective preschools.*” (DES 2003b:6)

More effective learning took place when the teacher motivated the children by matching activities to their needs and interests, when activities were carefully paced so as to provide challenging and engaging tasks for the children, when pupil’s involvement was carefully monitored, when a balanced combination of free-play, structured individual activities and group activities was used. (DES 2003b:6)

An extensive list of recommendations was made within the report, many of which related to the importance of support for teachers and childcare assistants. This support not only related to pre-service and in-service education but also the provision of opportunities for the dissemination of expertise and good practice. As the most recent and comprehensive review of early education provision in Ireland, albeit pertaining to one particular type of provision, this report could be a valuable resource to stimulate dialogue on the nature of good practice and the necessary elements which must be provided to support its continued development in all ECCE settings.

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5.4.3 Targeted Initiatives

As has already been stated in Section 4, the DES has taken a project approach to the development of new practice initiatives over the past decade. The impact of some of these initiatives has been evaluated and has provided some insight into the implementation of policy in practice.

5.4.3.1 Disadvantaged Areas Scheme

Schools included in this scheme receive a variety of different supports – over-quota teaching posts, additional capitation grants, a maximum class size of 29:1, school meals and funding for book rental schemes (DES, 2004, *Summary of All Initiatives Funded by the Department to help Alleviate Educational Disadvantage*. Accessed at: www.education.ie/servlet/blob-servlet/si_summary_02.doc, 16th May, 2004). Whilst these supports were welcomed by schools it has been reported that:

While the scheme has served a useful function in providing much needed resources to schools, particularly ones in urban areas, it cannot really be said to have operated positive discrimination in favour of designated schools. Given this situation, it would be unrealistic to expect it to have had much impact on students' achievements or life chances. (Kellaghan et al., 1995:63)

The conclusion appears to be that financial input alone is insufficient to improve the quality of provision and practice in schools:

Funding is no longer a daily problem in the designated schools, yet the principals felt abandoned in relation to guidance and support needed to disseminate such money in the most effective way. (Walsh, 2001:108)

5.4.3.1.1 Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)

This initiative is again targeted into

designated disadvantage schools and is designed to:

... address the discontinuity between the children's home and community experiences and the demands of schooling by maximising active participation of targeted pupils in the learning process and by promoting active co-operation and collaboration between home, school and community. (Murphy, 2000:11)

Parental involvement has been identified consistently within national policy and practice documentation as a key indicator of quality practice (DJELR, 1999; DES, 1999a; French 2003; NCNA, 2003b).

Evaluation of this initiative was completed in 1999 (Ryan, 1999), which addressed its impact on schools, parents and children. In general, the findings of the evaluation were positive, citing the fact that the assignment of a dedicated HSCL officer succeeded in increasing the level of interaction between teachers and parents, the school and the community, and also facilitated more coordination between support services e.g. remedial, therapeutic. These results would lend support to the position that levels of parental involvement can act as an indicator of quality provision.

5.4.3.2 Early Start

This initiative was established in 1994/5 as part of an integrated approach to educational disadvantage. It built on the Rutland Street Pre-school model (Kellaghan, 1977) and represented the first substantial intervention by the DES in the area of early childhood education. A total of forty schools are involved in the project which provides three-year-old children with one year of early education prior to entry into primary school. Some key features of the Early Start project which distinguish it from the infant classes in primary schools are; the shorter school day (children attend for up to 2.5 hours either in the morning or the afternoon), a maximum class size of

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fifteen pupils, the presence in each class of two trained adults (a primary teacher and a childcare worker) and the strong emphasis on parental involvement.

In 1998, the **Curricular Guidelines for Early Start** were developed (In-career Development Team, 1998). This publication provides guidance on the broad learning domains in Early Start settings, including cognitive, linguistic, personal, emotional, social, creative and aesthetic aspects. Insights are also forthcoming on ensuring quality practice is achieved and maintained within Early Start by virtue of the use of appropriate methodologies, child-observations, adequate planning and record keeping and parental and community partnership. Play is cited as a central mediator of the curriculum, whereby:

The quality of the play children engage in and experience must be of a high quality to support their development as effective learners.
(In-career Development Team, 1998:15)

The approach advocated was summarised in the Educational Research Centre's (ERC) evaluation report, **Early Start Evaluation: Report on Observation Visits to Schools** as "...one that embraces a structured, child centred, play oriented, self-directed learning experience in which adult-child interaction, including parental involvement is seen as central." (Lewis and Archer, 2003:25) In addition to the curriculum guidelines, innovative models of in-class teaching support were piloted. This project has been evaluated in 1998 (ERC, 1998) and in 2003:

All aspects of implementation were examined including enrolment and attendance patterns, the nature and duration of classroom activities, the teacher-childcare worker relationship, and the extent of parental involvement. Tracking the achievement of pupils also formed a

major part of the evaluation. (Lewis and Archer, 2003:1)

As a result of the initial evaluation, a number of recommendations were made to try to improve the impact of the Early Start initiative on the cognitive and language development of the children. These included more clearly defined objectives, more emphasis on small group work, better planning and preparation based on the profiling of student achievements, clarification of the role of the child care worker, expanded in-service provision and increased parental involvement. The second evaluation report was published in 2003 and the outcome of this process is of particular interest to this review as it included observation of classroom practice in its methodologies. The observation instrument used was the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms *et al.*, 1998). This instrument is structured around a set of quality indicators which are rated on a seven point scale (1 = inadequate, 3 = minimal, 5 = good, 7 = excellent). It also provide a set of questions for use in interview with teaching staff. The researchers adapted the ECERS-R to suit the context of the study and a total of seven subscales were measure these included:

- Space and furnishings;
- Personal care routines;
- Language reasoning;
- Activities;
- Interaction;
- Programme structure;
- Parents and staff (Lewis and Archer, 2003).

The conclusions that were drawn in this evaluation yield some valuable insight into practice in this Irish early childhood setting.

Observation of practice in the centres visited lends support to the conclusion that Early Start is a high

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quality intervention with a strong emphasis on adult child interaction.
(Lewis and Archer, 2003:15)

Despite this very positive statement, it was generally observed that there was room for improvement in all classrooms. One particular concern was that “...implementation of the curriculum was observed, though not to the degree or depth presented in the curriculum guidelines.” (Lewis and Archer, 2003:15) However, this was felt to raise more questions about the suitability of the curricular guidelines than the practice of the teachers:

More fundamentally, perhaps, it may be necessary to ask if the standards in the guidelines are pitched at a level beyond the reach of most three to four year olds.
(Lewis and Archer, 2003:16).

This report is a unique piece of research regarding practice in early childhood settings in Ireland in the period under

review and affords a welcome opportunity to engage in debate regarding the nature of quality practice.

5.4.3.3 Breaking the Cycle

Under this initiative, which again is targeted at combating educational disadvantage, selected schools are allowed to employ extra staff to reduce pupil:teacher ratios in the Junior classes to 15:1. In addition, dedicated in-service for staff and increased funding is provided.

Evaluation of this initiative has also been completed, and in general, reported that the initiative had succeeded in improving the achievement levels of pupils (Weir *et al.*, 2002a;2002b). However, some concern has been expressed that the potential of this initiative is not being fully realised due to the lack of qualified teachers. Evaluation of classroom practice is not a feature of these reports; however, they do highlight the importance of training and qualifications of teachers and lend support to the premise, established in research, that there is a positive correlation between this factor and the quality of service provision.

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - DES

Defining Quality:

1. Early Start evaluation highlights the necessity of clearly defined target/objectives, small group work, better planning and preparation based on students achievements, and clarification of roles are key ingredients of quality practice.
2. Levels of parental involvement is an important indicator of quality.

Assessing Quality:

1. A comprehensive review of the current inspection system for schools and the development of appropriate materials, training and support mechanisms are in train. This provides a possible infrastructure upon which to build the ECCE inspection processes.

Supporting Quality:

1. There is limited information on practice in infant classrooms in Ireland – research in this area would be of benefit to the development of the NFQ.

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2. Support for quality must include comprehensive in-service training and development of teachers.
3. Opportunities for the dissemination of good practice are essential to the implementation of quality .
4. The need for specialised support and guidance for management is strongly indicated.
5. The existence of written guidelines/standards does not in themselves guarantee quality.

5.5 The Department of Health and Children (DHC)

The **Child Care Act** (DoH, 1991) imposes a statutory duty on health boards to inspect pre-school services. It also places an obligation on the providers of preschool services to notify the relevant health board of their existence and to conform to the **Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations** (DoH, 1996a). In 1998, Preschool inspection teams were established in each health board. The staff of these teams comprised an environmental health officer and a public health nurse. Preparation and support of these teams varied according to the health board, however, training was not generally given prior to the commencement of the inspection process (Duignan, 2003).

5.5.1 The Inspection Process

Once a preschool service has complied with the Regulations by notifying their health board of their existence, the Inspection process outlined within the **Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations 1996 and Child Care (Preschool Services) (Amended) Regulations 1997 and Explanatory Guide to Requirements and Procedures for Notification and Inspection** (DHC, 1998) commences. The guidelines recommend that services be inspected on a regular basis.

It is considered good practice that the first inspection occurs within 3 months of receipt of the notification and thereafter once a year from that date. (DHC, 1998:42)

It is important to note that in practice, the frequency of inspections is highly dependent on the number of services within the health board area and indeed on the availability of staff (Duignan, 2003). The purpose of the inspection is outlined in the Explanatory Guide as follows:

Inspection is designed to ensure the health, safety and welfare of children and the promotion of their development. It is also to ensure compliance with statutory requirements. To this end the inspectors will consider:

- How the children are being cared for and how their development and welfare is being promoted;
- The suitability and safety of the premises;
- The standards of the premises in terms of space, heat, lighting, cleanliness, ventilation and repair and maintenance;
- The suitability of the person providing the services;
- The availability and suitability of toys and equipment. (DHC, 1998:41-42)

The Regulations require health boards to send a written report of the outcomes of an inspection to the service provider. If this

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report highlights any areas of non-compliance with the Regulations, the provider is given a timeframe within which to reply to the report with details of how compliance will be ensured. If the deficiencies in service provision are deemed to be presenting a risk to the welfare of the children, then a second inspection visit is conducted within a shorter interval than the standard. In cases of serious and persistent breaches of the regulations, the health board may bring the matter to the attention of the District Court under Part VII of the Child Care Act, 1991 (DoH, 1991).

5.5.2 Implementation of the Inspection of Preschool Services

Inspection of preschool services have been in place since 1998. However, there is very limited information available at a national level on the implementation of the Regulations and no national evaluation of their impact on practice has been conducted. A communication from the DHC in response to a request for information for this paper stated the following with respect to the implementation of the inspection process:

The experience of the pre-school inspection teams is that the majority of preschool providers wish to achieve a high standard of service and work in partnership with the teams to achieve and maintain this standard. (Childcare Policy Unit, DHC, Personal Communication, 15th March, 2004)

A review of the Preschool Service Regulations has been ongoing since 2002 and it is anticipated that this will be completed in 2004. Submissions to this review process were invited from a broad range of stakeholders in ECCE, but these are not within the public domain.

Anecdotal evidence from the ECCE sector suggests that whilst regulation has been broadly welcomed and perceived as

necessary, implementation has been varied and dependant upon the individual capacity of the preschool inspection teams.

The Mid-Western Health Board conducted a **Review of Preschool Inspection and Information Services 1997-1999** and concluded:

While the standard of care in a number of services inspected was seen to be of a high standard, the standard of services generally was considered to reach only a basic and satisfactory level. In most cases providers were dedicated and caring people but were limited in their capacity to provide higher quality in their services. (Mid-Western Health Board, 1999:34)

It should be noted that this review was conducted at the end of the 'start – up' phase of the Preschool Inspection Service and refers to one health board area. Unfortunately, no other health board conducted comparable research nor has this study been replicated more recently. In response to this literature review, the Early Childcare Services of the Western Health Board submitted a report on their quality initiatives in ECCE. They report, "A review of interpretation of the current preschool regulations on a county by county basis is currently underway in order to achieve a regional standard." (Bernard, J., Personal Communication, Manager Early Childcare Services, 27th February, 2004) Furthermore they report that, "A review of compliance levels in County Roscommon 2003 indicated a low level of compliance and a low standard in child development." (Bernard, J., Personal Communication, Manager Early Childcare Services, 27th February, 2004) Improvement on this position was indicated as a priority for 2004.

It is not possible to make inferences about the impact of the Regulations on the quality of service provision based on such limited

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evidence. Only one small piece of research has addressed this specific issue, ***A Study of the Impact of the Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations (1996) on the Quality of Early Childhood Services in Ireland: The IEA Pre-Primary Project Revisited*** (O’Kane, 2004). Whilst the sample involved is limited, it does conclude that there is some relationship between improvement in the quality of provision and the implementation of Preschool Regulations:

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

The report concludes that as these variables have been shown to be predictors of classroom quality in so far as they facilitate high quality interaction between adults and children, it can be argued that, “...*the regulation of structural variables can affect quality in ECCE settings.*” (O’Kane, 2004:22)

It would be worthwhile at this point in time to establish some research to evaluate the impact of the existing Regulations on the quality of service provision. Such research would assist in any future development of regulatory frameworks for ECCE.

5.5.3 Childminder Voluntary Notification Scheme

The Child Care (Preschool Services) Regulations 1996 do not extend to childminders who look after, in their own home, three or fewer children in the birth to six age range. Concern for this omission led to the establishment in 2001 of the above scheme. The intention is to encourage childminders to notify the health boards of their service and in return receive advice and support from their local childminders advisory officer. The role of

the advisory officer is outlined by the DHC as follows:

- Setting up and speaking at public information meetings for childminders who are looking after three or fewer children;
- Facilitating the establishment of local networks of such childminders;
- Preparing information literature;
- Supplying information and/or organising training courses on a wide range of appropriate topics e.g. child development, child protection, health and safety, grant schemes, tax incentives etc.;
- Providing advisory visits to the childminders home to assist them in developing best practice;
- Acting as a referral point between parents and childminders (Childcare Policy Unit, DHC, Personal Communication, 15th March, 2004).

This initiative is recent and as yet has not been evaluated. It does, however, represent an important step towards quantifying and qualifying the scope and nature of childminding in Ireland.

In response to this review, the South Western Area Health Board (SWAHB) submitted an information pack they have developed within the Childminding Advisory Service in conjunction with Kildare CCC, ***Childminder’s Advisory Service – Information Pack***. It aims to give “*a brief overview of what is entailed in the running of a Childminding service*”. (SWAHB and KCCC, 2003:1)

It outlines the key legislation that childminders should be aware of, gives details of useful contacts such as the NVCs, Social Work services, insurance companies and highlights “...*important points...*”(SWAHB and KCCC, 2003:5) for childminders to consider under the headings of business, health and safety and child welfare and development. It also

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provides brief guidelines on issues such as record keeping, partnership with parents, tax, PRSI, work permit/visa, some sample forms for contracts with parents, keeping of child records and the administration of medicine.

5.5.4 Other Initiatives

In addition to reporting on actions specifically related to the implementation of the regulations, the report from Early Childcare Services in Roscommon also outlined a number of 'Approaches to Quality' (Bernard, J., Personal Communication, Manager Early Childcare Services, 27th February, 2004) within the Western Health Board area. These include:

- Provision of support, since 2002, by Early Childcare Services in County Roscommon for the implementation of the High/Scope approach to quality with sixteen groups;
- Participation in a recently formed Quality and Training Sub committee of the Roscommon CCC with a brief to review approaches to quality in the county;
- Collaboration by Mayo Early Childcare Services with the Mayo CCC in the implementation of the Effective Early Learning (EEL) approach from the University of Worcester with a target group of 25 ECCE services. (See Section 5.7 for more details).

Another interesting project established in 2001 by the Katherine Howard Foundation in partnership with the South Eastern

Health Board is the **Community Playgroup Initiative 2001-2004** (CPI). This was established to provide support and funding to five specially selected community playgroups in order to enhance the quality of their provision. The project provides capital funding and the support of a coordinator who visits the playgroups regularly to advise and mentor the planning and implementation processes. The project is due to be completed in 2004 and evaluative processes have been built in to the project design. An interim report (CPI, 2003) highlighted the following as key elements of quality within the CPI:

- The interaction of those involved, both children and adults;
- The development of parental involvement;
- Attention to both staff and committee members;
- The development of links and networks with others;
- The management of the playgroup;
- The physical environment, inside and outdoors (CPI, 2003).

The final evaluation report, which will be completed in 2004/5, will address the following criteria; profile of service, playgroup management, human resources, child-centred environment, activities and routines, interaction, parental involvement, links to statutory and voluntary bodies, finance and the CPI-model of delivery. It will be a welcome contribution to the growing understanding of what constitutes quality practice in ECCE in Ireland.

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - DHC

Defining Quality:

1. The outcomes of the review of the 1997 Pre-School Regulations may change the statutory environment for the operation of Pre-school services and as such will impact on the development of the NFQ.

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2. Key elements of quality which have been identified to date through health board initiatives include: interaction of children and adults, parental involvement, support for staff and committees, networks/links to other groups, management, the external and internal physical environment.

Assessing Quality:

1. There is very little known about the impact of regulation upon the quality of practice in ECCE settings. Research in this regard would provide valuable data for the development of future initiatives related to quality.

Supporting Quality:

1. Initiatives to support childminders, addressing the issue of quality practice, are in their very earliest stages and therefore their capacity to engage with the NFQ may not be as great as those of other ECCE providers.

5.6 Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform (DJELR)

The policy perspective for the involvement of the DJELR in ECCE is that of affording equality of opportunity for parents to participate in the labour force (see Section 4). A Pilot Childcare Initiative (1994–1997) provided capital grants to community based childcare projects with a view to making more childcare places available to parents living in disadvantaged areas. The evaluation of this initiative, *Developing Childcare Services in Disadvantaged Areas* (McKeown and Fitzgerald, 1997) highlighted in particular the key role played by appropriately qualified staff in capacity building within childcare facilities.

This recommendation resulted in the establishment in 1998 of the Community Support Childcare Initiative. It was evaluated in 2002, *Staffing, Quality and Childcare Provision* (ADM, 2002). Twenty-five childcare projects, each in a disadvantaged area, were allocated IR £40,000⁶ for two years to “...be utilised by projects to enhance their staffing structures and thus improve the quality and sustainability of the childcare service being delivered.” (ADM, 2002:1) Seventeen

of the projects were also allocated capital funding to increase the capacity of local childcare facilities through “...support, mentoring and training.” (ADM, 2002:1)

Throughout the evaluation report of this initiative the term “*quality childcare provision*” featured repeatedly. The indicators of quality expressed in the report highlight the importance of clear management/operational structures for the childcare facility, appropriately qualified staff and the establishment of good relationships/networks with parents, families and the local community. The evaluation concluded that the projects targeted “...had, in the main very weak organisational structure and management and planning skills. However over the duration of the Programme they had developed their capability to meet their reporting and monitoring requirements.” (ADM, 2002:34)

The capital funding under this initiative provided the opportunity for the targeted services to upgrade their facilities to meet the requirements of the Preschool Service Regulations under part VII of the 1991 Child Care Act, which were coming into effect in 1998/1999. This was a major benefit as it was observed in the evaluation report that “...many of these facilities would have faced closure, due to their inability to meet increasingly stringent

⁶ Approximately €50,000

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childcare regulations." (ADM, 2002:34)
This observation provides some insight into the state of childcare facilities in Ireland at this time. The Regulations described as "*stringent*" (ADM, 2002:34) by ADM in this report did present great difficulties for many ECCE service providers despite the fact that they were regarded as minimum standards by the DHC (DHC, 1998).

These difficulties found a forum for expression in the development and publication of the ***National Childcare Strategy*** (DJELR, 1999). Practitioner and provider representative organisations, amongst others, were able to voice their concerns regarding the need for support for providers to comply with the regulations. This lobbying effort, combined with the upsurge in demand for childcare as a result of the booming economy, resulted in the establishment of the most significant national initiative to develop and enhance the provision of childcare in the history of the State – the ***Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme*** (EOCP).

The details of the EOCP (2000-2006) have already been outlined (see Section 4). However, their impact on practice is the concern here. It is noteworthy that the key effectiveness indicator for the quality sub-measure of the EOCP is the number of trained childcare workers. In 2003, the NDP/CSF completed a mid term review of the EOCP, ***Evaluation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006*** (NDP/CSF, 2003). The report reveals that the observations made in the evaluation of the Community Support Childcare Initiative (ADM, 2002), regarding the management/ structural capacity in services still applies:

...a major constraint facing the programme is the lack of capacity on the part of beneficiaries to draw-down funding. This relates primarily to under developed business management skills and inexperience in meeting public

funding requirements." (NDP/CSF, 2003:iv)

The second effectiveness indicator of the quality sub-measure is the establishment of local networks. Thirty-three CCCs have been established as a result. As outlined above, evaluation data is not available to establish the effectiveness of these structures in practice terms. However, the response rate to this survey indicates that the level of activity within and across the CCCs is variable. Seven of a total of thirty-three CCCs were able to submit materials pertinent to this review and three other others indicated that they were at an advanced stage of production with relevant documents.

The third effectiveness indicator was the support being given to the NVCOs. The evaluation reported that seven of the nine recognised NVCOs were being supported at the time of the review. However, again, the impact on quality practice was not evaluated or documented. Interestingly this literature review has yielded evidence that five of the seven funded organisations were able to submit materials related to practical quality improvement initiatives and this material will be considered later in this section. This is a potential indicator of the positive impact of the EOCP funding on the development of quality practice in the ECCE sector.

The impact on practice of the EOCP through initiatives and activities of the NCCC has much potential, e.g. the publication of the ***Model Framework for Education, Training and Qualifications*** (DJELR, 2002a), which articulates clearly and for the first time, a set of guiding principles for practitioners of ECCE. Unfortunately, no evaluation of the impact of this and other activities on practice has been established to date.

The most recent initiative under the EOCP relates to the support and development of Childminding in Ireland. This has been

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detailed in the Section 4. It is an important initiative for practice because it indicates recognition on the part of the DJELR that funding alone is not a guarantee of improvement in quality practice. Support in the form of training and networking is also important.

5.7 The City/County Childcare Committees

A consistent theme in literature pertaining to the development of the ECCE sector in Ireland has been the need for a coordinated infrastructure which would ensure that children, parents and families, as well as service providers and practitioners, are afforded equal access to appropriate supports. This relates to their ECCE needs, in the case of the former and/or their role in meeting those needs, in the case of the latter. To this end, the Childcare Directorate in the DJELR established thirty-three CCCs with a clear remit to support and enhance the development of quality childcare places in their respective jurisdictions.

At this stage in the roll out of the EOCP, there has been variable progress in achieving this brief. All CCCs have prepared and published **Strategic Plans**, which outline their proposed actions related to the development of quality. The CCCs were provided with equality and diversity guidelines by the NCCC to support this process. The actions outlined in the plans include; audits of quality, production of information materials, hosting seminars, facilitating networking and advisory support and training. Anecdotal evidence suggests that much activity in support of the development of quality is taking place. A number of committees have developed materials specifically designed to support quality and others have them in production. Several have invited other organisations such as the BCCN, NCNA or IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, to

deliver their quality assurance/improvement packages to ECCE providers in their region.

Some of the material submitted by the CCCs for this review has already been covered in the policy section. In general most of the practical literature has been designed either to support parents in their choice of ECCE services or to support prospective ECCE service providers in establishing a service. This statement from the Cavan CCC, in their publication, **Brief Guide to Establishing a Childcare Facility in Cavan**, is reflected in many of the documents: “*Any childcare facility which is being set up in Co. Cavan should be a quality childcare facility.*” A quality childcare facility is further defined as one which has trained and committed staff; high adult/child ratio and in which “*...the overall developmental needs of the child are being met.*” (Cavan CCC, 2001:1)

Each Committee operates autonomously to respond to the unique needs of their county. For example, **Galway CCC**, one of the earliest established committees, has published a broad range of information to support practitioners as they develop services (Galway CCC, 2003a-f), including a comprehensive guide to developing policies and procedures, recruitment guidelines and a Childminder’s information pack. They also have produced a video to assist parents choosing childcare. All their materials are available in Irish and English to cater for the needs of all the constituents of the county.

Waterford CCC has produced a **Guide to Training in Childcare and Social Care in Waterford** (Community Consultants, 2003), responding to the training needs of practitioners in their county. In addition to developing materials that respond to local needs, the CCCs are also establishing links with other support services e.g. the health boards and NVCOs to coordinate the dissemination of information.

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Sligo CCC have published ***Managing a Childcare Business in County Sligo*** (Sligo CCC, 2002). This document largely draws on the work of the BCCN in relation to quality and promotes the BCCN Quality Assurance Programme (details below). It also comprises information related to legislation, finance and business planning and development.

As has already been stated, many of the CCCs are supporting the implementation of quality assurance programmes with ECCE service providers in their area. For example, Mayo CCC has chosen to implement the ***Effective Early Learning (EEL) Programme*** developed by the Centre for Research in Early Childhood in Birmingham and University College Worcester, in the UK. This programme aims:

- To develop a cost effective strategy to evaluate and improve the quality and effectiveness of early learning available to young children in a wide range of education and care settings;
- To achieve this through a collaborative, systematic and rigorous process of self evaluation, which is supported and

validated externally (Centre for Research in Early Childhood, n.d.).

The dimensions of quality are identified as:

- Aims and objectives;
- Learning experiences/curriculum;
- Planning, assessment and record keeping;
- Staffing;
- Physical environment;
- Relationships and interaction;
- Equal opportunities;
- Parental partnership, home and community liaison;
- Management, monitoring and evaluation (Centre for Research in Early Childhood n.d.).

The programme is implemented through a Quality Evaluation and Improvement Cycle, which, “...enables practitioners, parents and children to work collaboratively and systematically on the development of their practice.” (Centre for Research in Early Childhood, n.d.) The Mayo CCC report that twenty-five early childhood services will participate in this programme over the next three years.

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - DJELR

Defining Quality:

1. Indicators of quality identified through evaluation of DJELR initiatives include: the importance of appropriately qualified staff, clear management/operational structure in ECCE services, establishment of good relationships/networks with parents and the wider community.

Assessing Quality:

1. Assessment of quality must include both internal and external evaluation processes

Supporting Quality:

1. Management skills within ECCE services need to be supported and developed if the capacity to engage with national policy is to be enhanced.
2. Funding alone is not sufficient to ensure quality practice - a broad range of supports

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must also be in place.

3. Many different initiatives related to the development of quality in ECCE are at various stages of development and implementation. This raises the issue of potential duplication, confusion and general quality 'overload' for ECCE practitioners.
4. The infrastructure developed as a result of the EOCP provides a potential support for the NFQ.

5.8 Practitioner Perspectives

The history of the ECCE sector in Ireland, outside the provision of national school education prior to 1990, is largely characterised by a *laissez-faire* attitude on the part of the State. This climate fostered the proliferation of a broad range of community and voluntary activity to make provision for the ECCE needs of babies, young children and their families. Over time, much of this activity resulted in the formation of support organisations whose brief was to develop and enhance the quality of practice in early years services for the benefit of children and families. Unfortunately the largely voluntary nature of many of these organisations in their earliest stages precluded them from documenting their activities in any great detail and so much of the earliest initiatives in quality practice in ECCE in Ireland are unavailable for review. With the availability of funding, particularly since the advent of the EOCP (1998 to present day), there has been a notable upsurge in the number of publications addressing the quality issue. Requests for information for this review yielded documentation from the following organisations:

- Pavee Point
- The National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA)
- St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland.

5.9 1990 - 2000

All community and voluntary organisations would argue that the rationale for their establishment, dating in the case of the IPPA to the 1960s, was the desire to provide children with positive, enriching and quality early childhood experiences. However, practical initiatives suffered from lack of funding and whilst the organisations themselves endeavoured to establish support infrastructures for their membership, inability to afford full time staff and heavy reliance upon voluntary work made the establishment of any national quality assurance programme virtually impossible.

Despite the difficulties with funding, there were efforts made by the more developed voluntary childcare organisations to publish information related to quality childcare. The NCNA published **Quality Nursery Care for Your Child** in 1990, and an updated version in 1997. This publication was targeted primarily at parents seeking full day care. In the absence of any statutory regulations, it attempted to respond to parents' expressed need for guidance in this important selection process. A key statement in this early document articulates a definition of quality childcare as follows:

- Barnardos
- Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN)
- Childminding Ireland
- Children in Hospital Ireland
- High/Scope Ireland
- IPPA - the Early Childhood Organisation

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Good quality care means meeting each child's needs and, above all, fulfilling their need for love and attention. (NCNA, 1997:5)

Parents are provided with a series of prompts and checklists to support their visit to prospective day care settings. These cover the premises, safety precautions, equipment, hygiene, nutrition, staffing, activities and education.

During this time, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, had also been developing and circulating a range of leaflets advising members on a wide variety of quality-related issues. In 1994 these were gathered together in the **IPPA Information Pack**. This publication was designed to support practitioners who wished to set up playgroups and included a code of standards for playgroups which covered accommodation, washing and toilet facilities, ages and numbers of children, staff, adult-child ratios, equipment, health and hygiene, safety, records, insurance and planning permission. A set of fire safety guidelines was also provided. These were accompanied by a set of information sheets giving a basic outline of legislation related to playgroups, training courses available, suitable equipment and stockists, roles of managers, play-leaders, dealing with child abuse, welcoming a child with special needs and contact details for a wide range of potential support organisations. The aims of the IPPA are outlined at the beginning of the document and include a commitment “...(t)o maintain a code of standards for playgroups.” (IPPA, 1994:1)

Throughout the 1990s the awareness of the importance of ECCE grew rapidly, and with it, concerns related to quality of provision of early years services. The National Forum on Early Education (Coolahan, 1998) and the processes established by the DJELR towards the publication of *The National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999) (see Section 4), catalysed a sense of common purpose and identity amongst the many

diverse groupings. Many began to participate in consultative processes towards the development of a variety of practice initiatives (OMNA, 2000) and this in turn supported internal development of policy and practice documentation.

In 1998, the NCNA revisited the issue of quality and published a set of quality guidelines for practitioners delivering full day care services, **Towards Quality Daycare** (NCNA, 1998). A total of twelve headings or categories were identified with a detailed list of quality indicators under each heading. The categories included staff and management, child-staff ratios, premises and facilities, caring for babies, play provision and equipment, safety and hygiene, fire safety, record keeping, and legal requirements. The influence of the newly commenced Preschool Regulations is evident in the inclusion of the last three categories which themselves attract specific mention within the Regulations.

It is worth noting that during this period, funding from the European Structural Funds of the European Union, particularly those targeted through the New Opportunities for Women (NOW) programme enabled many ECCE services to begin development work toward the improvement of the quality of their services. In many cases, this funding facilitated the recruitment of staff and allowed for investment in staff education and training (OMNA, 2000).

In 1996, the European Commission Network on Childcare published **Quality Targets in Services for Young Children** (European Commission Network on Childcare, 1996). This document did influence policy development in Ireland, however the influence on practice is harder to quantify as no research has been conducted in this regard. What is possible to detect, however, is the influence that this document has had on quality improvement materials that have been developed since the advent of the EOCP in 2000.

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5.10 2000 - Present

The materials submitted by the listed organisations all relate to current initiatives and activities on quality. Some of the organisations have targeted their quality materials to reflect the nature of their membership, thus the Childminding Ireland materials are intended to support childminders, the NCNA primarily deal with full day care provision and the IPPA with sessional services. Others such as those produced by Barnardos, are more generic and pertain to a variety of early years settings.

Most of the organisations have developed and implemented quality assurance programs. These programs culminate in an award being made to the successful service. These awards do not have any credit against the national inspection systems. However, as will be seen, when the nature of these programs are unpacked and examined, they do take account of the legislative requirements for practice in early years services and support practitioners in meeting these requirements.

As has already been outlined in preceding sections, many community and voluntary organisations have published policy documents in respect of quality in ECCE. It is also true that representatives of these organisations have been involved in the development and drafting of national policy documentation e.g. *The National Childcare Strategy* (DJELR, 1999). The focus of this section is the practical initiatives that are being taken to support early childhood practitioners develop implement and sustain quality in their work with children. They are briefly described here in alphabetical order.

5.10.1 Barnardos

Barnardos is Ireland's largest children's charity. It is committed to the best interests of children and young people in Ireland,

promoting and respecting their rights in all their work. They:

- Provide a wide range of services to effectively respond to the needs of children and their families;
- Increase the understanding and skills of parents and professionals;
- Influence the development of policy and provision for children and families in Ireland, as a vocal advocate for children. (Barnardos, 2004, Accessed at: <http://www.barnardos.ie/about.php?PHPSESSID=e541edd83a6bcb1e8a586802c7fb58c7>, 10th June, 2004)

Supporting Quality (French, 2003) is the title of the most recent publication pertaining to quality produced by Barnardos, with the aim:

To provide information for childcare provides to help to enhance quality of services to children. (French, 2003:11)

It defines good practice as being a dynamic progression towards achievement of a set of core criteria. (French, 2003:12). It is divided into eight chapters, each dealing with a specific aspect of childcare. Under each heading criteria for good practice are outlined and considered. The headings are:

- Policies and procedures;
- Management;
- Human resources;
- Partnership with families and communities;
- Child-centred environment;
- Curriculum;
- Observation, assessment and behaviour management;
- Health and safety (French, 2003).

Barnardos have adopted the High/Scope approach to early years curriculum. In this publication, French (2003) outlines ten features of good early learning curricula.

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The document presents a summary of best practice provided at the end of each chapter heading with a view to promoting self-assessment of the part of the service provider.

Barnardos have also responded to the importance of staffing for quality service provision by producing **Personnel Practice in Early Years Services: A Guide** (Barnardos, 2002). This addresses the three key areas: policies, procedures and legislation; recruitment and selection processes and management and supervision. Once again, it is structured with self-assessment checklists at the end of each section.

In 2001, Barnardos collaborated with Foras Áiseanna Saothair (FÁS), the national training authority, to develop **Assuring Quality: Manual for Assessment of Community Employment Projects Providing Early Childhood Services**. (FÁS and Barnardos, 2001.) This programme is delivered in three distinct but related stages:

Stage 1: Quality Assurance – Standards. Participants are assisted in the development of standards for their individual projects. Training is delivered on a range of topics considered key to the delivery of a quality service.

Stage 2: Assessment – Monitoring. Participants assess their own service, using structured questionnaires supplied in the manual, and are supported with mentoring and advice and further training.

Stage 3: Implementation – Response. Development plans are produced to support the implementation of changes needed within the service that have been identified in stage 2. Further training is provided to support this process.

The programme is informed by community development principles and recognises that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is not possible

in early childhood services, which are characterised by huge diversity:

This programme was devised in order to respect that difference. It allows for the identification of project specific standards, assessment of each projects own strengths and areas for improvement (using this manual) and then returning for guidance on what is and how to make the next step. (FÁS and Barnardos, 2001:3)

The manual contains fourteen separate sections for completion; thirteen of these provide information and guidance on key criteria for quality:

- Aims and objectives;
- Policies and procedures;
- Management and administration systems;
- Planning, monitoring and reviewing systems;
- Human resources;
- Relationships and communications;
- Child-centred environment;
- Curriculum to include child development and play;
- Child observation and assessment systems;
- Equality opportunities;
- Accessibility;
- Parent and community and statutory involvement;
- Health and safety. (FÁS and Barnardos, 2001)

No evaluation of this programme has been conducted to date.

5.10.2 Border Counties Childcare Network (BCCN)

The BCCN is a unique network funded by the DJELR’s EOCP 2000-2006 and by the North Eastern and North Western Health

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Boards. The funding is primarily aimed at supporting the development of a co-ordinated approach to the delivery of high quality early childhood services in the counties of Monaghan, Meath, Louth, Cavan, Donegal, Sligo and Leitrim. The BCCN has been actively promoting the development of quality in ECCE for a number of years and have produced a wide variety of publications in support of this goal. As a direct result of the EOCP funding, the BCCN has developed a **Quality Assurance Programme** for sessional pre-school services which they are currently implementing. The intention is that similar programmes will also be developed and implemented for full day care and family day care in the near future. The aim of the BCCN Quality Assurance programme is:

To promote good practice in sessional preschool services by providing a comprehensive quality package. (BCCN, 2004)

The package has four elements; information, evaluation, bytes (sic) of training and accreditation. Each one considers four aspects of childcare; children, parents families and communities, environment and legislation, and management and staff. The programme is underpinned by a set of eighteen principles. It involves the childcare provider in a process of producing a portfolio of evidence of the quality of their service. Two distinct stages in the quality assurance process are identified:

Stage 1 – Sign up and service evaluation;

Stage 2 – Accreditation (BCCN, 2004).

The service evaluation system that has been developed involves a series of questions with tick boxes. There are seven separate units and the questions are very detailed and specific. The seven headings are:

- Legislation and management;

- Staffing;
- Partnership with parents;
- Premises;
- Safety health and hygiene;
- The learning environment;
- The preschool curriculum (BCCN, 2004).

This process allows a childcare service to identify its areas of strengths and weaknesses. With the support of the BCCN Quality Officer, each service then embarks on its own individualised quality improvement programme. This may involve some training that is designed and delivered by the BCCN. The service completes a quality portfolio and this is then submitted to a panel of experts recruited by the BCCN for accreditation. The scoring procedure used in the BCCN documentation involves using a 1-5 Likert Scale, with a range of performance indicators under the seven unit headings. If the service is awarded BCCN accreditation, then an award is made to the service which is valid for two years. After this period, a review of the service under the same criteria is deemed necessary to continue accreditation.

Closely associated with the BCCN, the Lagan Family Daycare Network, directly funded by the DJELR, under the EOCP, produced **Best Practice Guidelines for Childminders** in 2003. This document is designed to support childminders, and potential childminders, in their role of providing “...a quality, flexible and accessible childcare service.” (Lagan Family Daycare Network, 2003:1) Issues addressed include the Preschool Regulations, parental involvement, play activities, nutrition, health and safety requirements and administration.

The evaluation of the impact of these initiatives is not available to date.

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5.10.3 Childminding Ireland

Representing, arguably, the most commonly used form of childcare in Ireland, this organisation was established in 1983 by a small group of Childminders providing family day care, and is now the national body for childminding, funded by the DHC.

The aims and objectives are to :

1. Promote high standards in family-based day care for children;
2. Promote the interests of Childminders as a very important component in the workforce;
3. Provide training, support and advice for Childminders and Parents;
4. Establish a network of local groups;
5. Maintain a Register of Childminders.

Recently Childminding Ireland has been engaged in the development of **Quality Indicators in Family based Day-care** (Childminding Ireland, 2004). This publication takes the stance that the quality of family based day care is highly dependant on the personal characteristics of the individual childminder and states:

The role of the childminder is to provide a comfortable, friendly safe home-from-home environment with access to outdoor play for a small number of mixed age children, which actively promotes learning, exploration and fun. (Childminding Ireland, 2004:3)

Five areas for quality are identified:

- Children
- Parents
- Wider community
- Self and family
- Employees (Childminding Ireland, 2004).

It is intended that the document will provide a practical but encouraging manual

to support self-reflection, mediating regulations and legislation with the family environment of the home.

5.10.4 Children in Hospital Ireland (CHI)

Children In Hospital Ireland is a nationwide voluntary organisation promoting the welfare of sick children by drawing attention to their special needs for emotional security. Since its foundation in 1970, it has supported and helped thousands of parents before, during and after their child's stay in hospital.

CHI offers an advice and information service by post and phone for parents and professionals, maintains a dialogue with parent groups and all concerned with the care of sick children. It also organises hospital play schemes and seeks to increase the awareness of policy-makers to the special needs of sick children.

In addition to research and education programmes, CHI publishes a range of informative literature for parents, children, hospitals and health professionals and conducts research into the most pressing requirements of sick children. Of particular relevance to this review of practice in ECCE is the **Charter for Children in Hospital** that outlines ten principles of good practice in this field of ECCE (CHI, 2002b). Issues addressed in the charter are; the right of children and parents to information mediated in age appropriate manner, right to informed participation in all decisions involving their healthcare, children's need to have full opportunities for play, recreation and education, the importance of appropriately trained and qualified staff, need for continuity of care and confidentiality, privacy and respect issues.

In 2000, **Guidelines for the Care of Children with Special Needs in Hospital** (CHI, 2000) were published.

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These are “...intended to augment, not replace, those principles and practices embodied in professional roles or established good practice in the workplace.” (CHI, 2000:3) Very practical guidelines are offered in this document, e.g. communicating with children; involving parents in childcare and support; physical care, including positioning, feeding, diet etc (CHI, 2000).

5.10.5 High/Scope Ireland

Established in 1999, High/Scope Ireland brings together representatives from the voluntary, statutory, independent and community sectors in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland who wish to enhance the quality of ECCE through the High/Scope approach.

High/Scope is an approach to early learning derived from developmental principles. Grounded in practice, it has been researched, developed and shaped by new knowledge and understanding over a 40-year period. It is an approach based on the principle that active, participatory learning in supportive environments is conducive to the growth and strengthening of open democratic societies.

High/Scope Ireland has developed the **High/Scope Accreditation Pack** that is conceptualised as a “...journey of personal and practice development between the trainer and practitioner.” (High/Scope Ireland, 2003:3) It involves working through a series of stages as follows:

1. Curriculum Implementation Course – comprises 10 workshops over a 10 month period. A variety of curriculum areas (e.g. active learning, the physical learning environment, the daily routine, observation and record keeping) must be undertaken by the early years practitioner as a first step towards becoming an accredited High/Scope setting.
2. Implementation of High/Scope in the early years setting - participation in cluster groups of other similarly placed services for ongoing support and training (may include onsite and offsite activities.)
3. Application for Accreditation – a portfolio of relevant documentation (detailed specifications supplied) must be submitted to High/Scope Ireland.
4. Use of **Program Quality Assessment Tool (PQA)** - High/Scope assessors carry out site visits over two days. They conduct interviews and collect evidence on seven key indicators of effective learning environments:
 - Physical learning environment
 - The daily routine;
 - Parental involvement and family services;
 - Staff development;
 - Setting management;
 - Curriculum planning and assessment;
 - Adult-child interactions.
5. Accreditation panel evaluation - the evaluation report is issued and if successful, accreditation is awarded (High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2003a; b).

The PQA tool has been developed and adapted from the materials originally developed by High/Scope in the United States. It has been designed especially for pre-school sessional settings and uses rating scales as scoring mechanisms. The claimed strength of the PQA is that the psychometric properties have been subjected to rigorous testing:

A series of national and state-wide evaluation studies shows the Preschool PQA to be a highly reliable and valid instrument for

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measuring program quality and determining its relationship to staff qualifications, staff development initiatives and young children's developmental outcomes.

(High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, 2003a:15)

These evaluations were carried out in the United States and have not been replicated in the Irish context to date.

5.10.6 IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation

IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, is the largest voluntary organisation working for young children and their families in Ireland. It was founded in 1969, and presently has a membership of over 2,000 services. This includes a wide range of service provision - Playgroups, Parent and Toddler Groups, Full Day Care Groups, After-school and Out-of- School Groups and individual members. IPPA is a nationwide practice-based organisation, representing members at local level through the IPPA branches and at national level through the National Committee. In 2000, IPPA produced a quality assessment tool, *Quality Indicators for Childcare Services* (IPPA, 2000a). Six headings are identified in the document:

- The Physical Environment;
- Activities and Experience;
- Adult- child Interactions;
- Partnership with Parents;
- Observation and Assessment;
- Staff and Management (IPPA, 2000a).

Under each heading, a detailed list of quality indicators is outlined and descriptors are provided to enable assessors to rate the early years provision against a three point rating scale; Minimal, Adequate and Good.

This can be used as a self-assessment tool.

A series of detailed questions under each heading are also included for service providers, designed to help them evaluate practice within their own setting. It also forms part of the assessment process for the IPPA Quality Improvement Programme.

In 2002, IPPA established a **Quality Improvement Programme** (QIP) to support early childhood services in their pursuit of quality provision. This programme focuses on “*the quality of the learning experiences of children and families involved in the service and the quality of relationships between children, adults and between children and adults in the service.*” (IPPA, 2002c:15) There are a number of different elements to the QIP including: “*monthly training workshops, on site support and evaluation/ assessment.*” (IPPA, 2002c:14) There are two distinct phases in the IPPA QIP:

1. The set-up phase during which the programme supports the service to establish a basic service framework that involves all the dimensions of the service including:
 - Aims and values;
 - Physical environment;
 - Daily routines and rituals;
 - Activities and experiences of children;
 - Interactions, learning and teaching strategies;
 - Observation, consultation and analysis;
 - Assessment and planning;
 - Partnership with families and communities;
 - Staff and management.
2. The Quality Cycle phase – this is the “*...action research phase that aims to establish on-going reflective practice within the service in collaboration with the stakeholders.*”(IPPA, 2002c:16) It involves four stages; Evaluation,

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Action Planning, Implementation and Reflection, and is designed to establish these processes in the everyday practice of the service and service provider. The QIP is viewed as a long term strategy and it requires a commitment of three years participation from each service. The IPPA Quality Officers provide structured support in the form of training and mentoring for the first two years of the programme and the third year involves participation in a network of other such early years services. At the end of the two years, the service may apply for accreditation by IPPA. Accreditation is available for both the service and the practitioners participating in the QIP. The assessment process involves self-assessment and validation by the IPPA Quality Officer against the aforementioned IPPA quality indicators. The evidence for the accreditation process will have been gathered during the intensive two-year quality cycle e.g. Support visit reports completed by the Quality Officer.

The QIP was piloted with eight services in 1999/2000. A **Report on the Pilot Quality Improvement Programme** giving details of the implementation of the programme was produced in 2000 (IPPA, 2000b). Some interesting observations are made in the report including:

- The unsuitability of established baseline quality measurement tools such as the ECERS for use with the services in the pilot programme;
- The low wages and lack of resources, including time, that characterise many of the services does not encourage staff to be enthusiastic about improving quality;
- The majority of staff had low levels of appropriate training;
- Parental expectations regarding literacy

and numeracy often guided the programme of activities in the services (IPPA, 2000b).

The evaluation of the programme was conducted through observation by the quality support worker, completion of questionnaires and evaluation forms by participants, conversations with children and informal feedback from external agencies. The findings are reported as universally positive, with improvements in the experiences of participants, parents and children cited. A key recommendation was the need for more intensive support from the Quality Officer for services, especially in the early stages of the process. The report concludes that:

Quality programmes can only work when these three elements, training, on-site support and assessment are in place. It is clear that information and advice are not sufficient. Services in general do not have the capacity or expertise to implement self-assessment and improvement on their own. They may meet regulation standards but they will not go beyond them. (IPPA, 2000b:47)

The IPPA's continuing commitment to the development of quality in ECCE is reinforced by their recent publication of **Power of Play – A Play Curriculum in Action** (Brennan, 2004). This document is an exploration of play practice and related theory in a variety of ECCE settings. Through the use of pictures and associated learning stories, this publication aims to encourage practitioners to engage in reflective practice towards the improved recognition of and provision for quality play experiences for children.

5.10.7 National Children's Nurseries Association (NCNA)

The NCNA was established in 1988 to promote high standards of quality

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childcare. This countrywide organisation has a membership of over 400. Members of the association promote the physical, intellectual, emotional and social development of the children in their care, in a warm, welcoming and safe environment. The work of the NCNA mainly concentrates on providing advice, support and training for member nurseries, as well as raising public awareness regarding issues affecting the childcare sector. Since 2000, the NCNA have, in common with five of the other NVCOS⁷, been in receipt of funding under the Quality Sub-measure of the EOCP. As a result of this funding, a number of practice related publications have been produced to assist service providers to achieve and improve quality standards and the NCNA Centre of Excellence Award (CEA) has been established.

In 2000, the NCNA published the first in a series of publications related to quality practice in ECCE settings. The **Good Practice Self-Assessment Manual** (NCNA, 2000c) is designed to support self-assessment by managers in full day care services. It is influenced, as are much of the publications produced by the NCNA, by the work of the National Association for the Education of Young children (NAEYC), a North American based organisation, and the writing and theory of Diane Trisker-Dodge, a North American based expert on effective practice with young children. (Dodge, 1991, NAEYC, 1998) The publication is highly structured and employs Likert Scales and checklists under a range of headings to facilitate a detailed review of practice, both by the service and the individual. The main guiding questions it addresses are:

- What exactly is good practice?
- How can it be promoted through self-assessment?

- What can a self-assessment manual accomplish for those who use it? (NCNA, 2004, Accessed at: www.ncna.net, 11th May, 2004)

The next publication, chronologically, **After School – The Way Forward** (NCNA, 2000a), addresses the subject of after-school provision, i.e. care and education services for children of school going age (4 years plus) out of school hours. This is a very under developed type of service provision in Ireland and the publication is designed to provide information and advice on establishing after school provision. It does consider quality practice and “...(t)he principle aims of the guidelines are to promote the establishment of good practice across the after-school sector and to provide a guide to understanding and meeting the varied needs of the school-aged child.” (NCNA, 2004, Accessed at: www.ncna.net, 11th May, 2004)

It draws on United Kingdom (UK) practice and experience and cites a number of UK publications, which make recommendations on good practice in this area.

We Like this Place... Best Practice Guidelines for the Design of Childcare Facilities followed in 2002 (NCNA, 2002a). This publication is intended to “...offer practical information and guidance on best practice in the planning, design and adaptation of childcare facilities and draw attention to the current statutory requirements.” (NCNA, 2002a:3) The information covers all aspects of the design, layout, alteration, renovation and extension of childcare facilities and it also contains reference sections that provide recommended resources for further information.

In 2003, the issue of quality standards was revisited with the publication of **Towards Quality Daycare - Minimum Quality Standards in a Nursery** (NCNA,

⁷ Childminding Ireland, Barnardos, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland and Forbairt Naíonraí Teo (formerly An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta Teo.)

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2003b). The primary aim of the publication is “..to promote the establishment of good practice within the membership of the National Children’s Nurseries Association.” (NCNA, 2004, Accessed at: www.ncna.net., 11th May, 2004) This document updates and revises the earlier NCNA publications under the same title. As with its predecessors it attempts to provide comprehensive details of the criteria for quality practice in full day care provision. The standards are divided into a number of subject categories from health and safety to partnership with parents. They combine legal requirements and best practice guidelines.

In addition to the publication of support documentation is the aforementioned **Centre of Excellence Award (CEA)** in 2002. This is a very comprehensive assessment and validation system which “...acknowledges NCNA members who are providing excellent standards of care for children in Ireland”. (NCNA, 2004, Accessed at: www.ncna.net., 11th May, 2004)

Upon application, service providers receive a **Self-Evaluation Profile (SEP)**, which must be fully completed and returned to the NCNA. The NCNA can provide a range of supports including advice, information mentoring and training for those in the process of applying for the CEA.

The SEP is very structured and requires providers to assess themselves against very detailed standards under the following headings:

- Activities and programmes for children;
- Relationships in the nursery;
- Partnership with families;
- Health, safety and hygiene;
- Staff conditions and professional development;
- Physical environment;
- Food and nutrition;
- Management and administration;
- Implementation of policies and procedures;
- Evaluation and review of nursery (NCNA, 2003d).

Providers are asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1-10 under each criteria and a minimum rating of 6 is required for each before the profile will be acceptable for submission for validation. If this target is achieved, the service provider may then submit the portfolio for the next step in the award process i.e. assessment visit from NCNA external validators. The duration of the visit depends on the size of the service but will generally require validators to be present in the service for one or two days to complete an in-depth evaluation of all dimensions of practice. If an award is made after completion of this process, it is valid for two years. After this time, the service must reapply to renew their award (NCNA, 2003d).

To date thirty services have been given a CEA nationally.

5.10.8 Pavee Point

Section 4 has outlined the contribution of Pavee point to the policy debate on the issue of diversity and equality in ECCE in Ireland. Subsequent to the publication of **Éist** (Murray and O’Doherty, 2001), a development initiative was established to pursue the practical implementation of this document’s policy recommendations. This work resulted in 2004 in the publication of **Ar an mBealach – On the Way, Diversity and Equality Training Manual for Early Childhood Trainers** (Pavee Point, 2004b). This manual offers a “...structured programme of exercises and tasks to bring participants on a journey of change; offering accurate information, attitudinal exploration and skills for working with children and families.” (Pavee Point 2004b:7) The manual offers a conceptualisation of quality in ECCE based upon “....inclusive, equitable

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provision that supports children's well-being" (Pavee Point, 2004b:8) and challenges practitioners to achieve ECCE provision where "...diversity and equality is acknowledged, affirmed and respected..." (Pavee Point, 2004b:8)

5.10.9 St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland (SNMSI)

As a result of EOCP funding, a **Certification Process for Montessori Schools** was established. This process aims "...to improve the quality of Montessori schools in Ireland and to promote Montessori Education." (SNMSI, 2003) It is deemed to be a process that contains five elements:

- Self evaluation of the Environment;
- Montessori Education Advisor visits the classroom;
- Report on the environment;
- Evaluation of the process;
- Certification committee (SNMSI, 2003).

If certification is passed, then the school is issued with a certificate valid for three years, after which time the process must be repeated. This certification process is open only to fully qualified Montessori teachers. The self-evaluation instrument is designed to facilitate a description of the school environment and does not contain any evaluation elements such as rating scales. It seeks to discover facts regarding teacher qualifications, adult-child ratios, toilet facilities, numbers of children, classroom size and compliance with Preschool service regulations. In addition, it seeks to establish the range of Montessori equipment and activities under each curricular area.

5.10.10 National Voluntary Childcare Organisations' Collaboration

In addition to their individual work, these voluntary organisations have established a

collaborative 'umbrella' group to consider a wide range of issues related to the development of quality in ECCE. This group is funded under the EOCP Quality Sub-measure and provides a useful forum for debate and information dissemination on this key issue. One example of the benefits of such a group is the publication of **Guidelines for the Protection of Children in Early Childhood Services** (NCNA, 2000b). The booklet was produced to set down principles of best practice in child protection in order to safeguard the welfare of children and reflects the consensual position of all those groups who participated in its development and publication.

5.10.11 Quality Programmes in Disability Services

A number of disability services in Ireland make provision for young children in the birth to six age range. In recent years many have adopted a model of quality development produced by the Council on Quality and Leadership, a not-for-profit organisation based in the United States.

The Council supports the enhancement of quality in services for people with disabilities through the development of standards of quality and through the dissemination of materials and training. The Council also operates an Accreditation Programme and the accrediting body for many disability services in the United States.

Among the Irish services using this model are a number of the Health Boards (North East and South East) and the large organisations that provide services to children with disability, including St. John of God, Brothers of Charity, St. Michael's House and Western Care.

The Council defines quality as responsiveness to people rather than compliance with organisational process. Outcome measures for families with young

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children are used to measure the quality of early intervention services. There are twenty of these outcomes. The outcomes are predicated on the provision of a family-centred service. This is the model of service that is now universally considered to be the most effective way of providing services to young disabled children and their families (Guralnick, 1997). Key components of this approach are that:

- Services centre on the needs of families;
- Services are based in the community;
- Services are able to integrate the contributions of multiple disciplines;
- Services have the capacity to plan and co-ordinate services and supports.

The Council system (www.thecouncil.org) also uses outcomes for organisations to support organisational assurances and

leadership. These outcomes focus on governance, accountability and leadership

5.11 Summary

The profusion of quality assurance/improvement initiatives that have emerged from the NVCOs have a number of common themes under the headings of defining, assessing and supporting quality in ECCE services in Ireland. These are summarised in the table following.

As can be observed below there is strong consensus across these programmes. As these materials have generally been evolved through a consultative process, they provide a strong rationale for the validity and relevance of these themes to the NFQ.

Table 2: Thematic Summary of NVCO Quality Programmes

Defining (indicators)	Assessing	Supporting
Complex, multi-faceted and dynamic	Internal and external mechanisms necessary	Funding - sustainability
Physical environment	Clear, unambiguous criteria mediated by guidelines for variety of ECCE settings	Education, training and qualification opportunities for staff
Safety health and hygiene	National certification	Information
Programme/curriculum/routine	Biennial review	Mentoring and networking systems
Adult-child interactions	Observation as a tool	
Parental and community involvement	Reflective practice	
Staffing issues	Feedback essential - formative and summative	
Management and administration	Openness and transparency	
Philosophy, policies and procedures	Portfolio building	

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - Practitioner Perspectives

1. The NVCOs have been working with ECCE practitioners towards the development of quality service provision for many years and therefore have developed materials and expertise, which could support and enhance the implementation of the NFQ.
2. Each quality assurance/improvement programme has addressed the issues of defining assessing and supporting quality. There is strong consensus across these and they provide good evidence of the key issues that must be taken into account for the development of the NFQ.
3. Evaluation is planned on a number of these quality assurance initiatives and this will be of great value to the development and refinement of the NFQ.
4. The NFQ must take account of, and provide a reference point for, the wide range of existing programmes related to quality in ECCE. It should incorporate some mechanism for affording credit to those ECCE services, which have completed such programmes.

5.12 The Influence of Practitioner Education and Training

The positive correlation between the level of education, training and qualifications of adults working with young children and the quality of service provision is an issue that has attracted much support in literature in Ireland and in other countries (Ball, 1994; Oberhuermer and Ulich, 1997; DES 1999a; DJELR, 1999; DJELR, 2002a). However, there is relatively little research evidence to support this position internationally and none that has been conducted in the Irish context. Despite this lack of empirical support, this position has exerted significant influence on practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland especially since 1990. This influence is demonstrated in the recognition by the DES of the need for more qualified teachers and a subsequent upsurge in intake by the teacher training colleges, the development and review of education and training programmes at all levels from entry to higher degree in ECCE and the emergence of a community of researchers in ECCE in the Irish context.

Education, training and professional

development opportunities for those who work with children from birth to six years are as diverse and varied as the range of early years settings that exist in Ireland. Primary school teacher training has been to degree level since the mid 1970s, and whilst it is argued that in-service training is inadequate (DES, 2002f; INTO 2004), there is a standard level of in-service available to all qualified teachers. The situation for personnel working with children in settings other than primary schools is not so straightforward or standardised. Degree and postgraduate level programmes in early childhood studies have only been available since the mid 1990s. Currently, approximately 175 places per annum are available on degree programmes and demand vastly outweighs this capacity. The majority of education and training for ECCE personnel therefore is offered by education and training providers, whose courses may be nationally or non-nationally accredited to sub-degree level, or which indeed may not have any recognised accreditation at all.

In response to the conviction that improved education and training of personnel will lead to improved quality in ECCE service,

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there has been a great deal of effort and commitment made by ECCE personnel in Ireland to improve their own level of education and training. In 2002, the NCCC published a ***Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for Early Childhood Care and Education Practitioners in Ireland*** (DJELR, 2002a). This document represented the culmination of a comprehensive and lengthy consultation process and outlined the core skills and knowledge appropriate to each occupational profile within the sector. In addition, it set out for the first time the agreed core values that should underpin quality practice of all personnel. The ECCE sector values:

- Childhood in its own right;
- The rights of children, who are active agents in their own growth and development;
- Parents, guardians and families as the children's primary source of well – being;
- Professional development as central to good practice;
- The role of the practitioner as the facilitator of enhanced well-being and development of the child;
- Diversity by acknowledging and promoting each child's and each adult's individual personal and cultural identity;
- Equality of access and participation in services;
- A positive approach to the Irish language and culture;
- The right of children to protection from any form of abuse, neglect and discrimination;
- The right of children, families and childcare staff to confidentiality, balanced with the interests of the child and the right of all to protection from harm;
- Experiences and activities which support learning and allow children to

actively explore, to experience, to make choices and decisions and to share in the learning process;

- Play as the natural, constructive mode of children's interactions with their peers, adults and environment. (DJELR, 2002a:17)

This set of agreed values provides useful insight into the vision ECCE practitioners have of good practice in ECCE in Ireland. If, as intended, it does inform the future development of all education and training programmes for ECCE practitioners, then it will have contributed a great deal towards the achievement of consistent, coordinated and quality practice across all settings in ECCE.

The *Model Framework* recognises that achieving 'quality practice' places increasingly complex demands upon ECCE personnel. It also acknowledges that all professional practitioners involved in the development and delivery of education and care services for children in Ireland must be prepared to meet the challenges of the future. For example, commitment to a holistic approach to the delivery of education and care services for children requires that the perceived dividing lines between care and education must disappear. If the "Whole Child" perspective taken in the National Children's Strategy (DHC, 2000) is to be realised then integrated service delivery is essential. This will require practitioners to be able to work as part of a multidisciplinary team of professionals. This has obvious implications for the future development of education and training programmes. The key skills and knowledge required by practitioners in ECCE are outlined in the Model Framework document as:

- Child Development – including the domains and stages of development, the influences of environmental, biological, social and cultural influences, the roles and responsibilities of adults, methods and importance of child observation.

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- Education and play – including theories and processes of learning in early childhood, curriculum processes and approaches, role and importance of play.
- Social environment – including significance of social knowledge and experiences to development of social competencies in children, roles and responsibilities of adults.
- Health hygiene, nutrition and safety – including: knowledge of relevant theory and legislation, ability to implement relevant policies and practice, knowledge and ability to keep appropriate records.
- Personal professional development – including independent learning skills, ability to engage in reflection on own practice, development of key skills of literacy, numeracy, etc.
- Communication, management and administration – including ability to support relationships and interactions central to development of the young child (e.g. adult-child, child-child), ability to plan and maintain an environment conducive to optimal development of child, ability to establish and maintain effective information systems (DJELR, 2002a).

There is very little research on the level of training and qualifications amongst staff of early childhood services. Evidence from local research initiatives such as that conducted on behalf of the West of Ireland Network for New Sources of Jobs, gives some insight into the situation as it was in the late 1990s. Entitled ***Training, the Key to Quality***, the report concludes that “...low grade, low status, low rates of pay, lack of professional support and lack of access to accredited training describes the current status of many staff in early childhood services.” (Bernard, 1997:14) This, it is argued, has direct implications for the quality of service provision:

There are many ways in which

diverse and high quality services for young children can be created and supported, but research indicates that the better the pay and conditions, training and support for staff, the better the quality of the service. (Bernard, 1997:14)

In 2003, ADM produced ***National Childcare Census Baseline Data 1999-2000***, and as part of this process, some observations were made on the level of education, training and qualifications of staff in childcare settings (ADM, 2003). The overall conclusion was that ECCE was a low wage, low status occupation and there were low levels of training and qualifications amongst personnel employed in ECCE services. Whilst anecdotal evidence would suggest that this situation has improved substantially to date, there is no further national research evidence to support this.

Presently, there are no regulations regarding the education, training or qualifications of ECCE practitioners in Ireland in setting outside those operated and fully funded by the DES. This represents a major division in terms of the education and training of practitioners. Whilst a growing number of ECCE practitioners are qualified to bachelor degree level, teachers in the infant classes of primary schools must have achieved at least this standard and level of education (as outlined by the DES) in order to be fully qualified to practice.

The pre-service training that infant teachers receive is designed to prepare them to teach all classes and ages within the primary school, i.e. 4 to 12 years. The structure of primary teacher training has become standardised since 1974 and all teachers must now qualify to bachelor degree level involving three years study (or a postgraduate eighteen months course) and have completed a one year supervised probation period before achieving fully qualified status.

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The structure of the B.Ed degree programme is similar in all the colleges of education. *“In general the B.Ed programme is structured to apportion 40% to Education, 40% to academic subjects and 20% to Teaching Practice.”* (DES 2002f:28) The subjects covered in Education include Psychology and Sociology of Education, Music, Art and Drama in Education, Teaching studies, Curriculum English, Mathematics Education evaluation and assessment. The academic subjects include English, Geography, Mathematics, French and Religious Studies. Early Childhood Education is offered as an academic subject in two of the five recognised Colleges of Education.

5.12.1 Review of Primary Teacher Education

In 1999, a working group on Primary Teacher Education was established by the Minister for Education and Science. This was prompted in part by the introduction of the Revised Curriculum but also in acknowledgement of the fact that primary teacher education had not been reviewed since the early 1970s when it was extended to a three-year Bachelor of Education Degree. Many changes in the social and demographic profile of the country had occurred in the interim and these changes were making demands on the practice of teachers, which required support in terms of education and training. The extensive

deliberations of the review body concluded in 2002 with the publication of a report, ***Preparing Teachers for the 21st Century***, detailing sixty-one recommendations, covering a wide range of issues from selection of students to teaching practice and incentives for postgraduate study:

The main conclusion of the Working group is that teacher education needs to be reconceptualised and programmes radically restructured in the context of the framework and recommendations presented in this report. (DES, 2002f:154)

Whilst the report does provide some useful comment on the nature of teaching in primary schools, it does not specifically address the particular demands of infant teaching. Therefore, it is not possible to isolate what changes are being recommended for teaching in these early years settings. The Colleges of Education are presently taking on board the recommendations of this report and a number of them are engaged in internal reviews of their pre-service education programmes. One college has recently initiated a new Early Education degree programme, and whilst this may be completely unrelated to the report of the review body, it is a welcome innovation in that it expands the very limited capacity for degree level study for those who wish to work with young children in Ireland.

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - The Influence of Practitioner Education and Training

1. There is a general consensus that the education, training and qualifications of adults working in ECCE services has a direct impact on the quality of service provision.
2. Outside the formal education system, there are no standard qualifications required for practitioners in ECCE services.
3. A broad array of education training and qualifications has been developed to meet the needs of ECCE service providers.

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4. Many adults working with young children have years of experience but do not have any recognised qualifications.
5. The situation of infant teachers regarding terms and conditions of employment is standardised and regulated. This is not the situation for other ECCE practitioners outside the formal education system. In many instances, ECCE staff are afforded low status and poor terms and conditions of employment. This situation is not conducive to the implementation of a NQF.

Section 6

Research Developments 1990 - 2004

6.1 Introduction

In this section of the review, we consider the implications of research on quality in the Irish context. Some of the literature may already have been included in previous sections, in particular, evaluation reports which have provided insight into the effectiveness of both policy and practice initiatives. To avoid repetition therefore, we have only included research not mentioned heretofore. The relatively small body of research does not fall easily into distinct categories and therefore each piece is presented chronologically rather than subdivided into sections.

Research from individual academics is outlined in Section 6.4.

Research into quality in ECCE is limited in Ireland. The recently published *An Audit of Research on Early Childhood Care and Education in Ireland 1990 – 2003* (CECDE, 2003b) revealed:

...there has been little research in the area of quality in the Irish context, both in relation to quality indicators or the evaluation of more subtle and intangible aspects of quality.
(CECDE, 2003b:141)

Indeed, out of a total of 1,082 separate entries, only fifty-three directly address the issue of quality. A number of factors may have contributed to this situation:

- Higher education degree programmes, outside the teacher education colleges, have only been available in ECCE since the mid 1990s. Therefore, it is only very recently that graduates, equipped with

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the necessary research skills, have been available to initiate, develop and expand research programmes;

- Dissemination opportunities for researchers that would, in themselves, be a motivating force for research are very limited. There is no dedicated ECCE research association or journal in Ireland;
- Funding for ECCE research has traditionally been scarce and it is only since the publication of a broad range of policy documents in the late 1990s that any substantial funding for research programmes has been offered.

The CECDE Research Strategy (CECDE, 2003a) has a specific focus on quality and should do much to redress the findings of the Audit of Research as outlined above. As a first step towards the development of the NFQ, a consultation process was carried out with a broad range of ECCE stakeholders on the subject of quality.

Talking About Quality (CECDE, 2004b) elucidates the views of close to 400 practitioners in relation to defining, assessing and supporting quality as expressed in a series of national consultative seminars in late 2003. The perspectives of participants, including practitioners, parents, researchers, policy makers, infant teachers and health professionals, are consonant with many of the policy and practice documents cited in this review.

In addition, an international review of quality in several jurisdictions has also been completed, **Making Connections, A Review of International Policy, Practice and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education**, drawing many important conclusions for the Irish context (CECDE, Forthcoming B). These pillars of research will continue to inform CECDE policy as we continue with our brief of developing the NFQ.

6.2 1990 - 1998

The DES has traditionally commissioned research to support and evaluate its initiatives in early education. The ERC has largely been charged with the task of such research and has made a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge in education in Ireland.

The ERC was established on the campus of St Patrick's College, Dublin, in 1966. The research relevant to the issue of quality in ECCE is mainly the evaluation of initiatives and new programmes. These include the evaluation of the Rutland Street Project, Breaking the Cycle, Early Start and the HSCL Scheme. Whilst none of these specifically address issues of quality, each initiative was designed to explore the impact of changes, which have been articulated as indicators of quality elsewhere, e.g. lowering adult-child ratios. Most of these reports have been included in previous sections and the implications for the development of the NFQ drawn out.

The **Rutland Street Pre-school Project** was initiated in 1969 and was the forerunner and model for the Early Start Pilot Project. The evaluation of this initiative was not included as its original evaluation predates the time span of this review (Holland, 1979). However in 1993, the ERC revisited the Rutland Street Project to conduct a follow up on the educational development of the students who participated in the first five years of the programme. Whilst this report does not comment on the nature of the Project and focuses on the participants' development, it nevertheless does reiterate the continued validity of some of the original findings e.g. the critical importance of parental and wider community involvement and the need for continuity and coordination between pre-school and primary.

In the same year as the follow up Rutland Street Report, the Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital (Ireland),

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(now known as Children in Hospital Ireland), produced a report of a survey of **Play for Child Patients in Irish Hospitals** (Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital (Ireland), 1993). Quality is not the main focus of this report and the overall observations relate to the general paucity of play provision in hospitals. Despite this, it is useful to our understanding of the nature of play provision in hospitals at that time by virtue of the comments and recommendations on the limited provision that did exist. These highlighted issues such as the necessity for suitably qualified staff, for adequate space, materials and equipment, for clearly articulated policies and guidelines, for planned programmes of activities that are age and stage appropriate.

O’Flaherty *et al.* (1994) conducted an **Evaluation of St. Audeon’s Parent Preschool Health Promotion Project**, located in a disadvantaged area in Dublin. This focused on the reading and cognitive ability, emotional and social adjustment of children who partook in the project as well as control groups. A core characteristic of the project was active parental involvement and participation. The findings include “...an early rise in the IQ measurement of the children and a subsequent fading within three to four years.” (O’Flaherty *et al.*, 1994:35) However, children were better prepared for entry to formal schooling and were in a position to compete with their more advantaged peers.

Curriculum has emerged as a key criterion for quality in ECCE and in 1995, O’Flaherty compiled an evaluation of the High/Scope curriculum, **Intervention in the Early Years** (O’Flaherty, 1995). In this, she outlines the variety of perspectives in which quality can be viewed, including:

- Childcare workers – staff experiences and working conditions;
- Parents – extent to which service meets their needs and fulfils their expectation;
- Social service perspective – provision of

a comprehensive care service;

- Children – the child’s perception of the experience;
- Government/regulatory – social and moral obligation to set and monitor standards;
- Social policy funding perspective – extent of State support for childcare;
- Cultural specific perspective – quality defined in terms of the social norms, values, customs and beliefs of the people (O’Flaherty, 1995:19).

O’Flaherty further identifies structural aspects that contribute to quality childcare, including group size, adult-child ratios, training and qualifications, a planned programme, professional supports for staff, parental involvement, premises and equipment, working conditions of staff and adult-child interactions (O’Flaherty, 1995:20). However, these are more markers as opposed to measures of quality and it is necessary to utilise a range of quality indicators when assessing quality (O’Flaherty, 1995:108). This evaluation report, whilst valuable, is again limited to one approach in ECCE.

In 1995, a significant piece of research was undertaken which examined a broad range of variables of quality in a wide range of ECCE settings, **A Window on Early Education in Ireland**. The IEA Pre-primary Project (1995-1997) was:

...designed to assess the need for, and utilisation of, early childhood care and educational arrangements, the quality of the child’s experience in these settings... (Hayes *et al.*, 1997:2)

Thus a focus on quality was one of the three aims of the Project and the complexity of defining and evaluating quality in the Irish context are addressed in detail. This was part of a large cross-national investigation and involved 396 children in the Irish dimension of the project. The study found

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great differences in the quality of experiences of four-year olds, depending on whether they were attending preschool or infant class settings, in terms of curriculum, group sizes, equipment and resources, training and qualifications and activities pursued. Aspects such as the structural characteristics of the settings, teacher and parent expectations, the observation of children and adults and the child's developmental status were examined. Findings include the greater prevalence of training among teachers working in schools, much lower pupil-teacher ratios in preschool settings, the greater availability of equipment and resources in preschools and the emphasis on pre-academic skills and activities in the infant classes. One of the overall implications of the study was the call for:

A national debate about quality early education and the needs of young children is necessary. Such a debate would include parents, managers, practitioners, educationalists, researchers and policy-makers. (Hayes et al., 1997:114)

6.3 1998 - Present

Post 1997, the ECCE sector became engaged in a series of national consultation processes towards the development of key policy documents (see Section 4). A variety of research was carried out in support of these processes, however, such research was not always published or made available for public consumption. In general though, the research sought to establish baseline statistics regarding the range and nature of service provision and staffing issues, such as the levels of education and training. Research exploring the issue of quality in ECCE was not a feature of this research. As the Section 4 has clearly described however, quality featured as a prominent issue in the majority of these policy

documents. This reflects the fact that many non-statutory organisations were actively pursuing the achievement of quality in services and were conscious of the infrastructure and supports needed to aid this process. Engagement in the consultation process provided a forum for these issues to be expressed and recorded. Therefore, the policy documents that were issued after 1998 relating to ECCE are in themselves research reports, which reflect the collective views on the essential nature of quality in ECCE.

The data from the aforementioned IEA project was revisited when the original participants were seven years old and within the primary school system, ***Seven Years Old: School Experience in Ireland*** (Hayes and Kernan, 2001). Once again, this was part of a larger cross-national investigation and in the Irish context, included 94% of the original cohort of four-year olds. The study revealed that large amounts of time (65%) were spent on the core subjects of English, Irish and Mathematics, with a consequent negative impact on the remaining subjects within the Primary School Curriculum (DES, 1999b). Pupils were also to be found in large classes of between 24 and 36 pupils, with only one adult in 92% of cases. The study focused on pupils in both designated disadvantaged schools and those without designation and found a “...*statistically significant...*” difference on cognitive, linguistic, reading, maths and science ability in favour of pupils within non-designated schools (Hayes and Kernan, 2001:66).

As has been referred to in previous sections, the CCCs have been established under the EOCP to support the development of quality childcare places in their regions. In order to establish baseline statistics on existing provision, a number of the CCCs are in the process of conducting research. One such example of this is the North Tipperary CCC ***Information Gathering Exercise*** (North Tipperary

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CCC, 2002). This baseline research established that three in ten children in the area accessed some form of childcare, two in ten parents used childminders, sessional services accounted for the majority of centre based childcare services and the major deficit in provision related to full day care. This research does not address the issue of the quality of services. This is most likely due to the recent nature of the establishment of the CCCs and the fact that quality improvement programmes are presently being set up and will not be ready for evaluation for some time to come.

Despite this, some CCCs are conducting research on specific issues, which, it can be argued, are related to the provision of quality in ECCE services. One such issue is provision for diversity in children's needs. Waterford CCC published *Children, Diversity and Childcare* (Rush, 2003). The objective of the study was "...to research to what extent childcare provision in the city was meeting the needs of the following specific diverse groups; Traveller children, children with a disability, children in gay and lesbian families and refugee and asylum seeker children." (Rush, 2003:iii) The conclusions and recommendations of the report highlight the fact that service provision falls short of meeting the diverse needs of children. A number of factors contribute to this, including the general lack of provision of childcare services, the particular scarcity of provision for children under three years of age and children with disability and the specific need for integrated services for Traveller children. Additionally, it was highlighted that parents needed to be involved to a greater extent than is current practice in order to achieve quality in service provision.

The NVCOs and other community and voluntary organisations have been very active in recent years and have produced a wide number of publications related to quality (see Section 5). Undoubtedly, much research and review of literature has

underpinned these publications. However, there is very little actual published research on the specific issue of quality in ECCE in the Irish context. One exception to this is the IPPA publication *Child's Play – An Exploration into the Quality of Childcare Processes* (Carswell, 2002). This documents a survey of the membership of the IPPA to:

...assess the experiences of childcare providers/workers in an attempt to examine everyday pedagogic practices with specific focus on the providers subjective interpretation of play and learning within the context of early childhood education and care. (Carswell, 2002:3)

Despite a disappointing response rate (18.3%), which in itself tells its own story about the challenge of conducting research in the ECCE sector in Ireland, the report makes a case that quality in childcare is dependant upon the everyday practice in each childcare setting. It argues that until we establish the nature of the "everyday" (Carswell, 2002:4) and engage with practitioners at the level of this "everyday" practice, then quality standards will not effectively impact on the experiences of children. The insight afforded by this piece of research into the everyday practices in childcare settings revealed that whilst there was much to be positive about in terms of the adults genuine concern for the well being of children, there were a number of concerns regarding the prevalent view of the child as "...needy and dependent..." (Carswell, 2002:8).

Although the organisation of the everyday is based on a child centred ethos, the overwhelming view of the child as being needy presents difficulty for the pro-child ideology. (Carswell, 2002:22)

The report concluded that quality improvement measures, "...must seek to limit the extent of this contradiction."

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(Carswell, 2002:23) The method advocated to achieve this was the promotion of “..pedagogic reflexivity...” (Carswell, 2002:24) in practice.

Access to service is considered to be a key issue in quality and in 2003, the Northern Area Health Board conducted a piece of research, **A Consultation Report on Access to Care and Education Services for Pre-School Age Children with a Disability in North County Dublin**. As with other reports, quality as a separate and distinct issue was not identified; however again the recommendations highlight issues, which could be described as criteria for quality. These were:

- The importance of early identification and intervention,
- The need for coordination and planning of services;
- The need for appropriately trained and professional staff;
- The importance of information, knowledge and support for parents (Northern Area Health Board, 2003).

6.4 Individual Academics 1990-2004

A number of individuals are also responsible for an array of research documents in the Irish context. **Childcare in Ireland: Challenge and Opportunity**, provides a now historical perspective on the emergence of quality and equality in the Irish context (McKenna, 1990). Among many other issues, such as the need for increased female participation in the workforce, quality of services is seen as essential to entice women into the labour market:

The issue of quality care for her child affects the equality of opportunity for the mother and

women will not have genuine equality of opportunity until they have a quality alternative to their own care. (McKenna, 1990:18)

Gilligan (1991) provides a comprehensive overview of **Irish Childcare Services: Policy, Practice and Provision**, focusing particularly on child welfare and protection issues. Within this, the quality of services is cited as an issue in the Irish context, as there was no regulation of preschool services at this time. Furthermore, Gilligan asserts the importance of attaining quality within services if they are to have the desired effect for children:

For those concerned with child welfare, the battle for the quality of day care for the pre-school child must be fought hard. (Gilligan, 1991:142)

Hayes (1995:12-13), in her publication, **The Case for a National Policy on Early Education**, notes the complexity, yet necessity, of defining the more subtle and intangible aspects of quality in Ireland:

While it may be a difficult task to legislate for or assess such quality criteria, they must be discussed and detailed if effective early education, that will impact positively on the later educational experiences of children, is to be provided.

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acknowledges the complexity of defining quality in the Irish context, yet asserts that “...this should not excuse us from trying to identify elements in provision that are crucial to quality.” Hayes (1996:3) Once again, the more subtle and dynamic elements of quality, such as adult-child interactions and the developmental appropriateness of activities, are cited as the most important, and indeed the most difficult to identify and assess (Hayes, 1996:5). Hayes concludes by identifying

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three main areas relating to quality in need of review:

- Structures – coordination between the traditional divide of childcare and early education;
- Training – for all staff dealing with young children, at pre-service and in-service level;
- Curriculum – taking account of the totality of the child’s needs (Hayes, 1996:9-10)

Hayes (1999a) examines the impact of the curriculum and curriculum implementation on the quality of services, **Partnership in Curriculum Development**. A focus is placed on the role of society, the impact of parents and the role of educators in devising and implementing of the curriculum. Hayes (1999a:17) concludes that “...in the early years settings the curriculum is more than a statement of goals or desirable outcome; it is a process intimately associated with practice.” Thus, curriculum should emerge from practice, from “...loose curricular guidelines that allow for the curriculum to emerge...” and be informed by the daily child-adult interactions, as opposed to following a prescribed curriculum (Hayes, 1999a:17).

Hayes returns briefly to the subject of quality in **Children’s Rights – Whose Right?** (Hayes, 2002). Once again, quality is placed at the centre of the childcare process, whether that be within the home or in another setting. Furthermore, the perspective from which quality must be regarded is from the best interests of the child, as opposed to other competing interests:

It would focus on the quality of the provision for all children rather than addressing childcare as a service for parents who wish to, or need to, return to the labour market. (Hayes, 2002:71)

Duignan (1997) studied the factors affecting parental selection of childcare for young children, **Choosing Childcare**. Five key factors were identified by parents as being of paramount importance in choosing childcare, namely, hygiene, space, staff training/experience, staff-parent relationships and staff-child interactions (Duignan, 1997:28). Moreover, Duignan (1997:29) notes with interest that “...none of the parents referred to educational opportunities, reliability, food/nutrition or trust as factors in their choice.” Thus, the need to acknowledge the different perspectives from which parents view quality is affirmed.

Hearns (1998) examined **The Impact of Training on Workers in Early Childhood Education**, following a foundation course in playgroup practice. The study noted that the cohort that undertook training scored higher on positive relationships and detachment in comparison to a control group. Overall, Hearns (1998:61) concludes that:

The results indicate that the completion of a 120 hour training program resulted in higher levels of caregiver sensitivity and higher levels of children’s development.

Hennessy and Delaney (1999) conducted a study on the appropriateness of **Using the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale in Ireland** to assess global quality indicators. This scale was developed in the USA and rates settings on an array of criteria associated with quality characteristics. They note “...considerable debate in Ireland on what constitutes quality in early childhood services and how such quality can be achieved in the best interests of children, parents and child care workers.” (Hennessy and Delaney, 1999:14) Following a study of the use of ECERS in a variety of settings, Hennessy and Delaney (1999:24) conclude that, “...ECERS yields reliable observations in a range of different pre-schools in Ireland.”

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However, certain factors such as cultural variations in interpretations of quality and the types of services using ECERS were cited as warranting further attention.

Douglas *et al.* (2000) produced **Project EYE. An Irish Curriculum for the Three to Four Year Old Child**, by observing and documenting the experience and expertise of practitioners. The aspiration was that:

Through encouraging practitioners to identify, question and share the principles which inform their practice, it was hoped that the overall aim of raising the quality of that practice for all, would be realised. (Douglas et al., 2000:5)

Project EYE focused on the process approach to curriculum as opposed to product, placing great emphasis on learning how to learn. It focused on the development of the child as a holistic experience, and although it separated developmental domains for the presentation of the curriculum, reiterates that each element is interrelated and inseparable. The following domains are treated:

- Spiritual and moral development;
- Physical development;
- Cognitive development;
- Creative development;
- Language development;
- Social development;
- Cultural development;
- Environmental awareness and developmental education (Douglas *et al.*, 2001).

Horgan and Douglas (2001) analysed a number of research projects that had focused on early years settings in **Some Aspects of Quality in Early Childhood Education**. This study included a junior infant class, a Montessori school, a community playgroup, a junior

infant class in a Gaelscoil and a Naíonra setting. The observations made in these settings were analysed for aspects such as cognitive, linguistic and social challenges for children. Horgan and Douglas (2001:138) conclude that “...the pursuit of quality in early years education and care has been stymied and stultified by several factors.” For the voluntary sector, these include a lack of coordination between government departments and the various providers, the lack of training and the absence of adequate funding. The achievement of quality has also been impeded in the formal sector by environmental constraints such as inadequate space, high adult-child ratios and attitudinal negativity (Horgan and Douglas, 2001:139).

Educational Provision for Preschool Children provides a critique of the White Paper, *Ready to Learn* (McGough, 2001). She notes as striking the constant reference to quality within the White Paper as a guiding principle and a defining note of early childhood education. McGough holds that it is of paramount importance to interpret quality from the child’s perspective, “...quality of educational provision will be constituted in different ways for different children according to the imperative to meet individual children’s needs.” (McGough, 2001:3) Further concerns are raised in relation to the commitment to quality within the White Paper, especially for groups that are affected by disadvantage or who have special needs and McGough concludes by hoping that:

...this body (the Early Childhood Education Agency) will pursue the principle of quality in the context of whether and how the system can meet the children’s needs, rather than proposing to map the children’s needs on to the existing, wholly inadequate system. (McGough, 2001:12)

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Murphy (2001) completed both quantitative and qualitative research on ***Parental Involvement in Early Years Education and Care in the Cork Area***. The research found that there was less parental involvement in infant class settings and that a true partnership was a rarity in ECCE services. However, Murphy (2001:306) would hold that:

One of the hallmarks of a quality early years education service is that it works in partnership with parents to provide an environment in which children can develop to their fullest potential, and in partnership with all the other services which impinge on the life of the young child.

Bernard (2002) examined the quality and customer focus in early childcare services, ***On the Journey to Quality***. Interviews were conducted with service managers in relation to six main themes; quality, inspection and quality frameworks, influences and networks, role of the manager, customers and human resources, while childcare providers in Mayo were surveyed. In conclusion Bernard (2002:112) calls for “...a strategic and cross-sectoral approach to quality, incorporating a strong client focus...” Many of the other recommendations from this research are being undertaken within the Programme of Work of the CECDE (CECDE, 2001), including the development of a quality framework for ECCE services.

OMEP Ireland has held an annual conference in Ireland since 2002 and the proceedings of this conference are published annually. Many of the presentations shed light on postgraduate research studies that are completed and ongoing in Ireland. These include a wide variety of research material on all aspects of ECCE in Ireland. However, this section will focus on a number that relate directly to quality.

Murphy (2002), ***Rethinking Parental***

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Education and Care, advocates that an inherent characteristic of quality in ECCE is parental involvement, especially for children affected by disadvantage. In the Cork area, Murphy examined parental involvement in a variety of settings and noted that with increased employment for females and the growing professionalisation of the sector, among other factors, levels of parental involvement was impacted upon negatively. She concludes by acknowledging that the traditional forms of parental involvement are evolving and that parental partnership can only be achieved through dedication from staff and parents, and when adequate time and resources are afforded (Murphy, 2002:134).

Martin and Fitzpatrick (2002) also examined parental partnership in early years settings, ***Parents as Partners in Early Years Services in Ireland***. This involved using observations, questionnaires and in-depth interviews with parents and staff in approximately 200 settings in the Dublin region. Martin and Fitzpatrick focused on policies relating to parental involvement, participation within management structures, location for parental involvement, parents attitudes and expectations and attitudes of staff. The study concluded that the main impediments to participation was the lack of time, the lack of opportunity to participate and the sense that the activities they did participate on were “...staff directed and not characterised by a sense of partnership or mutual understanding.” (Martin and Fitzpatrick, 2002:151)

O’Kane and Kernan (2002) presented a paper outlining their proposed ***Study of the Impact of the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations (1996) on the Quality of Early Childhood Services in Ireland***. This process would involve issuing questionnaires to 54 settings in the east of Ireland, as well as qualitative observations in a smaller sample

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of settings. The quality of services prior to the introduction of the regulations was elicited from the IEA Pre-primary Project conducted in 1994. In this, the debate on the nature of the relationship between regulation and quality is analysed and the time scale for the research outlined.

O’Kane (2004:8) outlines the findings from the aforementioned O’Kane and Kernan (2002) study, *The Impact of the Child Care (Pre-school Services) Regulations (1996) on the Quality of Early Childhood Services in Ireland*, concluding that “...Generally speaking improvements were found in the quality of the structural characteristics examined in the present study as compared to that of the original study.” These included improved training and qualifications, staff-child ratios, equipment and resources and record keeping. Observations also elicited improved adult-child interactions, whereby staff “...not only include giving/receiving academic type information, but also include offering choices to the child, encouraging the child’s activities and providing assistance or clarification.” (O’Kane, 2004:17) Some of the improvements were directly attributable to the regulations, while improved levels of training were also understood to be an important factor in certain elements of the improved quality witnessed.

Corbett (2004) describes the content and workings of the *NCNA Centre of Excellence Award: The Contribution to Quality*. Corbett describes the complexity of defining and measuring quality within services, especially the more dynamic and subtle elements. Ten key aspects to quality were identified:

1. Activities and programmes for children;
2. Relationships in the nursery;
3. Partnership with families;
4. Health, safety and hygiene;
5. Staff conditions and professional development;

6. Physical environment;
7. Food and nutrition;
8. Management and administration;
9. Implementation of policies and procedures;
10. Evaluation and review of the nursery (Corbett, 2004:255).

The process of supporting and evaluating services participating in the initiative is outlined and preliminary findings are indicated to be positive. However, Corbett (2004:263) acknowledges the evolutionary nature of quality and that the CEA “...is a developing and growing work in progress.”

Daly (2004) describes the workings of the *Community Playgroup Initiative 2001-2004*, which was established to enhance the quality of provision in community playgroups. The complexity of defining quality and the multiple perspectives it is viewed from are analysed. For the purpose of the research, the main elements examined are adult and child interactions within the setting, staff, management, the physical environment, parental involvement and liaison with others. To this end, particular emphasis was placed on “...training, planning, monitoring and the development of reflective practice.” (Daly, 2004:269) The final report of the evaluation of the initiative will be available in 2005.

Walsh (2004) provided *An Overview of Irish Research Pertaining to Early Childhood Education and Care 1990-2003*. At this point, 1,097 pieces of research had been identified and classified within eleven thematic areas. One noteworthy finding of this research audit was the paucity of research in the Irish context relating to quality, comprising only 54 of the 1,097 publications. The lack of research on quality related both “...to quality indicators or the evaluation of the more intangible and dynamic elements of quality.” (Walsh, 2004:312)

Implications for the National Framework for Quality - Research Developments

1. The existing research base pertaining to quality in ECCE in Ireland is not sufficient to provide a solid evidential base for the future development of policy and practice.
2. The availability of funding dedicated to the establishment of research and practice related to quality in ECCE in Ireland since 2000 will yield very valuable data for the future development of policy and practice.
3. Likewise, the rapid growth in postgraduate studies in ECCE will also make a positive contribution to the body of knowledge on ECCE in the Irish context.
4. The lack of dissemination fora for ECCE research, policy and practice is a potential barrier to the future development of the ECCE sector.
5. The national infrastructure provided by the CCCs, Education Centres and the NVCOs has strong potential to facilitate dissemination of ECCE research, policy and practice.
6. These agencies are currently engaged in evaluation and research, which will provide valuable data for the future development of the ECCE sector.
7. Existing research by organisations and individual academics supports the validity of indicators of quality such as low adult-child ratios, parental involvement, appropriately qualified staff, well-resourced environments, clear policies and procedures, accessibility, respect for diversity and skilled management.
8. Research highlights the need for a children's rights based approach to the provision of ECCE, the necessity of developing tools for assessing quality that are tuned to the particular historical and cultural context of ECCE in Ireland, the absolute necessity of coordination by one agency of all development in the ECCE sector and the need for sustained long term funding.
9. More recent research (particularly that from the CCCs) has provided indicators of issues that must be addressed in the provision of quality ECCE services. These include: the low levels of ECCE service provision for children under three, the regulation of childminding, low levels of training of staff in ECCE settings, low status of ECCE practitioners, scarcity of services for children with special needs and general inadequacy of provision in ECCE services for the diverse needs of children and families.

Section 7

Conclusions and Recommendations

This report set out to review Irish literature under the headings of policy, practice and research pertaining to quality in ECCE services for children aged birth to six years in Ireland. The key objective of this exercise was to extract implications for the development of the NFQ. In this section, the implications are grouped under the headings of generic implications followed by those related to defining quality, assessing quality and supporting quality. Recommendations are presented at the end of the section based on a distillation of the implications.

7.1 Generic Implications

The review of the historical context for quality in ECCE in Ireland reveals that early childhood services did not feature in policy documentation to any great degree up until the late 1980s, and that quality was not a feature of this limited discourse.

A wide variety of perspectives on the role of ECCE exist in Ireland. These include:

- ECCE as a mechanism for promoting equality of access to the workforce for women and as such, a support for economic development;
- ECCE as a mechanism for combating educational disadvantage or social exclusion and;
- ECCE as an essential support to children's well-being and optimal development.

These different perspectives are reflected in national policy documents and programme initiatives, with the first two being traditionally dominant.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In more recent literature, there has been a call for the greater recognition of the many benefits of ECCE to children, families and society as a whole. This perspective, which asserts the rights of the child to ECCE services, requires national policy that more accurately reflects this position. It is therefore imperative that the NFQ fulfils this condition.

In addition to the wider variety of perspectives on the role of ECCE, there is also a multiplicity of viewpoints on what constitutes quality services. In effect, quality is seen as a concept that is subjective, dynamic and evolving. This will require the NFQ to incorporate sufficient flexibility to accommodate a broad range of approaches to quality service provision.

Despite the above statement, there is strong consensus on the importance of ensuring high quality ECCE service provision in Ireland. This belief is held by the majority of stakeholders and is rooted in the perspective that poor quality ECCE services can have a negative impact on the welfare and well-being of children.

This commitment translates into a number of specific conclusions regarding defining, assessing and supporting quality and these will be dealt with in greater detail in subsequent sections. However some general conclusions can be stated which include:

- Regulation alone will not ensure quality.
- A national registration system is a future imperative for all ECCE providers.
- Insecurity regarding long-term supports for ECCE in Ireland constantly undermines quality improvement initiatives.
- Political commitment to supporting children's rights is an important prerequisite to ensure the implementation of quality in ECCE services.
- Ongoing research in ECCE in the Irish

context is essential to the achievement of quality.

With regards to the NFQ, there is concern that the existing initiatives that have been established within the ECCE sector can find a reference point and indeed be accredited within the NFQ. There is a clearly expressed fear of duplication, confusion and voids in terms of the provision of quality improvement programmes and quality service provision. The NFQ should seek to allay these fears and ensure clarity and consistency in all approaches to the provision of quality ECCE services.

7.2 Defining Quality

The following conclusions can be drawn from the review of literature in relation to defining quality in ECCE service provision in Ireland. Throughout this section, the implications and recommendations are not presented in a hierarchical format:

- Quality is a subjective and dynamic concept that is difficult to define. It is constantly evolving and the journey towards quality must be perceived as a continuous process as opposed to a product.
- Various stakeholders can perceive quality from a multiplicity of perspectives and any attempt at definition must include such diverse viewpoints.
- Quality must be viewed as a continuum, containing a variety of elements that can be worked towards, both individually and collectively.
- Staff training and qualifications is an important indicator in the attainment and maintenance of quality.
- Services must be flexible and inclusive in order to accommodate all aspects of diversity within settings, including cultural, ethnic and linguistic variations.
- Quality services must provide adequate

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- opportunities for play for all children, taking cognisance of their age and stage of development.
- The environment of the child is of paramount importance in ensuring quality services. Such aspects include health and safety elements, the equipment, materials and resources available and the space available for play, both indoors and outdoors.
 - Parental, family and community involvement are inherent characteristics of quality in ECCE settings and mechanisms for meaningful cooperation, links and partnership must be forged to harness the positive potential of such involvement.
 - The curriculum or programme in operation within settings has a significant impact on the quality attained. Such a framework must be well-planned, flexible to meet the needs of individuals and employ apposite methodologies for its implementation.
 - The presence of efficient management structures and capable leadership within settings makes a significant contribution to the achievement of quality. Training and ongoing professional development is an important component in achieving this end.
 - The crux of quality within ECCE lies in the nature of the adult-child interactions that take place on a daily basis. Staff dispositions are an important element in this regard.
 - The level of planning and preparation of all personnel within settings impacts greatly upon the quality of the service provided.
 - Record keeping, both in relation to the child and other aspects of the work of the setting, is an essential component in the achievement of quality within settings.
 - The accessibility of services to all children and their families, regardless of socio-economic status or geographical location, is an important indicator of quality.
 - The existence of policies and procedures, their implementation and ongoing review, assists the achievement of quality within settings.
 - Placing the needs, abilities and preferences of the child at the centre of provision within settings is an inherent indicator of quality.

7.3 Assessing Quality

Conclusions regarding assessing quality also emerged from the review. Consensus was apparent on the following issues:

- In the assessment of quality, the multiple dimensions entailed must be acknowledged and any evaluation system must embrace the multiple perspectives and indicators of quality.
- As adult-child interactions are such a crucial factor in the assessment of quality, observations within settings are an integral component of assessment.
- Quality is a multi-faceted concept observed from a multitude of perspectives; therefore assessment should involve all stakeholders in the ECCE setting.
- There are two aspects to assessment. Internal self-assessment by the management, staff and stakeholders is an important aspect evaluating the quality of services. External assessment by agencies is also a valuable component in the assurance of quality. A combination of both these elements would provide a greater overview of the quality of the service as opposed to either individually.
- A legislative framework to ensure that the provisions of the system are complied with and hold weight within the sector should underpin the evaluation or inspection system.
- The assessment system should be holistic and developmental, praising aspects that are of high quality while

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also highlighting areas that are in need of improvement and remediation. A clear pathway should be delineated to inform services of how to improve quality within such aspects.

- The procedure for assessment within settings should be clearly stated and these guidelines or principles should be readily available to all stakeholders.
- Definite, unambiguous information and feedback should result from an inspection with clear recommendations for future progression. Such reports should be available to all stakeholders within the setting.
- It should be clearly understood by all that minimum standards do not equate with quality services and services should be encouraged to exceed mere compliance with minimum standards.
- Any new inspection system, focusing holistically on the care and education aspects of settings, should build on the existing DES and DHC inspection infrastructures.

7.4 Supporting Quality

The conclusions in relation to supporting quality in ECCE again centre on a number of key themes. These include:

- Coordination of policy, practice and research activities can only be achieved if one centralised agency, such as the ECEA (as envisaged by the White paper on Early Education), is established.
- Sustained long-term commitment to adequate financial supports on the part of the State are essential to the development of quality ECCE service provision.
- The availability of a qualified workforce with clearly defined career structures, good terms and conditions of employment and regular opportunities for continuing professional development

is fundamental to the development of quality in ECCE.

- A coordinated, cohesive infrastructure at national, regional and local level is essential for the delivery of quality services.
- Comprehensive, multi-media channels should be developed to ensure that relevant information on policy, practice and research developments can be communicated to all stakeholders as and when they need it.
- Support systems must make provision for regular communication between all stakeholders in ECCE.
- Regular review and reflection upon practice is a cornerstone of quality. This capacity should be initiated through training, and be supported in practice, by allocating adequate time for teamwork and continuous professional development.
- Support for children, families and practitioners is especially required at times of transition from one environment to another e.g. home to pre-school, pre-school to primary.
- Multidisciplinary supports are required for the delivery of quality ECCE services.
- Specialised supports are required for families at risk of disadvantage or with a child with special needs.

7.5 Recommendations

7.5.1 General

1. A national strategy should be developed towards the promotion of quality ECCE services in Ireland. This should incorporate:
 - An adequate and sustainable funding commitment;
 - A national data strategy to gather and provide accurate, reliable information to support the development of quality ECCE

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- services at national regional and local level;
- Mechanisms to support the education, training and professional development of adults working in ECCE service provision.
2. Professional practice in ECCE must be recognised, rewarded and supported. Clear career pathways, opportunities for education and training and a national code of ethics should be developed and implemented. This should support reflective practice and respectful decision-making in all aspects of ECCE service provision.
- 7.5.2 Recommendations for the Development of the National Framework for Quality**
1. The National Framework for Quality must take account of the multiple perspectives on the nature of quality that exists in Ireland. It must be flexible enough to accommodate the evolving, dynamic nature of quality and also the constantly changing needs of children, families and Irish society in general.
 2. The National Framework for Quality must be child-centred and have a childrens' rights focus. It should thereby provide a reference point for the coordination of all other national, regional and local policy, practice and research in relation to ECCE.
 3. The National Framework for Quality should provide clearly stated national standards for quality in ECCE in relation to the indoor and outdoor environment, parental involvement, professional qualifications and practice, programme/curriculum, resources and materials. These should be interpreted by a series of guidelines for implementation in the variety of environments that exist in ECCE .
 4. The National Framework for Quality should incorporate assessment mechanisms, which complement and build upon established and existing expertise and infrastructure. It should afford national accreditation for existing quality assurance/ improvement programmes and should promote both internal and external assessment processes. It should also make provision for the establishment of a national registration system for all ECCE service providers.
 5. The National Framework for Quality must incorporate a comprehensive range of support mechanisms that should include:
 - Establishment of networks to provide advice and mentoring for all stakeholders;
 - Multidisciplinary support teams (e.g. educational, therapeutic, administrative) to meet the diverse needs of children, families and service providers;
 - Reliable, comprehensive and up to date information in accessible formats;
 - A comprehensive programme of initial and continuing professional development for all stakeholders.
 6. The National Framework for Quality must promote coordination of existing national policy, practice and research. To this end, the implementation of the NFQ should be the responsibility of a centralised agency, which is in turn supported by a coordinated infrastructure at national, regional and local level.

Section 8

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Section 9

Appendices

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Appendix 1



Dear _____,

As you will probably know, the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is currently in the process of devising a Quality Framework for the early childhood care and education sector.

At present, we are completing a number of pieces of research to underpin and inform this process. These include the production of a Conceptual Framework on Early Years Learning, the facilitation of a series of public consultative seminars on quality and a review of best policy and practice regarding quality in the international context. An essential and integral element of this work programme is to conduct a literature review of national policy and practice relating to quality in the Irish context.

We want to present an accurate and representative picture of the diverse array of work in respect of quality in the Irish context in this report. Therefore, we would appreciate if you could send us any research papers, materials or documentation you or your organisation has produced regarding quality in early childhood care and education. This may include any quality assurance programmes, criteria for defining, assessing or supporting quality, discussion papers or evaluations of quality programmes and such like.

The deadline for the completion of this project is the end of March 2004; therefore any information you wish to have included in the report needs to reach us by Friday 27th February. Should you require any further information or clarification on the nature of our work, please do not hesitate to contact either Thomas Walsh (01 8842164/ Thomas.walsh@spd.dcu.ie) or Maresa Duignan (01 8842106/ Maresa.duignan@spd.dcu.ie)

Thanking you for your continued support and cooperation.

Yours Sincerely,

Thomas Walsh and Maresa Duignan

Appendix 2

An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta	Galway City and County Childcare Committee
Area Development Management	High/Scope Ireland
Barnardos	IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation
Border Counties Childcare Network	Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Carlow County Childcare Committee	Kerry County Childcare Committee
Cavan County Childcare Committee	Kildare County Childcare Committee
Childcare Directorate	Kilkenny County Childcare Committee
Childminding Ireland	Laois County Childcare Committee
Children's Rights Alliance	Leitrim County Childcare Committee
Children in Hospital Ireland	Limerick City Childcare Committee
Clare County Childcare Committee	Limerick County Childcare Committee
Cork City Childcare Committee	Longford County Childcare Committee
Cork County Childcare Committee	Louth County Childcare Committee
Department of Health Policy Unit	Mayo County Childcare Committee
Donegal County Childcare Committee	Meath County Childcare Committee
Dublin City Childcare Committee	Midland Health Board
Dublin Fingal Childcare Committee	Mid-Western Health Board
Dublin South County Childcare Committee	Monaghan County Childcare Committee
Dun Laoghaire/ Rathdown Childcare Committee	National Children's Nurseries Association
Early Start Coordinator	National Children's Office
East Coast Area Health Board	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
Eastern Regional Health Authority	National Disability Authority
Foras Áiseanna Saothair	

Section 9
Appendices

North Eastern Health Board

North Western Health Board

Northern Area Health Board

Offaly County Childcare Committee

Pavee Point

Primary Schools Inspectorate

Roscommon County Childcare Committee

Sligo County Childcare Committee

South Eastern Health Board

South Western Area Health Board

Southern Health Board

St. Nicholas Montessori Society of Ireland

Tipperary North County Childcare Committee

Tipperary South County Childcare Committee

Waldorf Steiner

Waterford City Childcare Committee

Waterford County Childcare Committee

Western Health Board

Westmeath County Childcare Committee

Wexford County Childcare Committee

Wicklow County Childcare Committee