＊ *quality childcare & lifelong learning*

Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector

Foreword

Childcare is one of the priority areas for the National Development Plan and the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006, which is part-financed through the EU Structural Funds and represents the largest investment of funding for childcare in the history of the State.

The overall aims of my Department's Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme are to improve the quality of childcare, to increase the number of childcare facilities and places and to introduce a co-ordinated aproach to childcare service delivery.

The issue of quality in any sector is inextricably linked to the issues of training, education and professional development. The National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee, chaired by my Department, established the Certifying Bodies Subgroup to build on existing work and to develop a draft framework for training, education and professional development in the Childcare Sector.

This document, a Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector, sets out a clear guide for professional development through childcare education and training. The central philosophy throughout the Model Framework is the well-being of all children in Early Childhood Care and Education.

The publication of this document marks the culmination of an extensive process of consultation and research by the Certifying Bodies Subgroup. In preparing the Model Framework, the Subgroup has sought to incorporate the views of the many different elements of the Childcare Sector and demonstrates the sector's ambitions regarding the improvement of standards in childcare training, education and professional development.

It is to the credit of the Childcare Sector and the members of the Certifying Bodies Subgroup that such a complex set of views and approaches to childcare training and education could be drawn together in this document in a way that retains the strengths of variety and inclusiveness in the Sector as a whole.

I am confident that this document will prove to be an important landmark as we strive to improve the quality of our childcare services and will be seen as a keystone to further advances in training, education and professional development in the Childcare Sector.

Michael McDowell TD
Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform
September, 2002

C O N T E N T S

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Preamble

This document presents a Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector in Ireland. It sets out the occupational profiles and core skills of those working in the sector and addresses how these profiles and skills can and should be used to inform the development of education and training programmes leading to nationally awarded/recognised qualifications. Throughout the document Early Childhood Care and Education refers to the definition agreed by the members of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare:

'…Day-care facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out of school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus services such as pre-schools, naíonraí, day-care services, crèches, playgroups, childminding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary secondary and special) and residential centres for children are not.'

(Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report, 1999, p.116)

The ECCE sector refers to practitioners, stakeholders, community and voluntary organisations, statutory and non-statutory bodies and support, education and training organisations.

The Framework is set in the context of a number of key documents which provide both legislative and policy framework to support and inform the development of the sector. In particular the National Children's Strategy (2000) has articulated key principles that will guide and inform the future development of services for children. The 'whole child perspective', which is clearly described in the National Children's Strategy, is fully endorsed by the ECCE sector.

'The "whole child perspective" allows those working with or supporting children to focus on their own particular interest and responsibility while at the same time recognising the multidimensional aspect of children's lives. It identifies the capacity of children to shape their own lives as they grow while also being shaped and supported by the world around them.'

(National Children's Strategy, 2000, p.24)

This document has been produced following a process of dialogue and consultation in relation to training and qualifications, a process which began in the ECCE sector during 1995 (OMNA 2000a) and continues today with the National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC). The NCCC identified childcare qualifications as a priority area for attention and, in February 2000, established the Certifying Bodies Subgroup. The Certifying Bodies Subgroup was asked to develop for the NCCC, based on dialogue and consultation, a model framework for education and training in the ECCE sector. This has led to the development of a set of core values, occupational profiles and standards that are presented in this document.

The wide-ranging consultation process undertaken in reaching this point has been challenging and, at times, difficult. There is, however, a high level of commitment within the ECCE sector to resolving issues related to the education and training of practitioners. Community and voluntary organisations, which represent a wide range of practitioners, have been actively engaged for many years in providing for the training needs of their members through a variety of innovative initiatives. These organisations have been assisted by the relevant statutory bodies, including FÁS. The production of this document reflects the commitment of the ECCE sector to the rights and well-being of children.

This document cannot be said to be the final product as the ECCE sector in Ireland is currently experiencing a period of rapid and unprecedented change. It is anticipated that this dynamic phase will continue into the future, requiring that policy developments in respect of qualifications for practitioners will need to be flexible, regularly reviewed, evaluated and revised.

'dynamic phase will continue'

Introduction

From a tradition of minimal involvement in the provision of ECCE, except in the case of child protection, childcare has become a major policy issue at Government level. The framework for assuring the quality of care and education is crucial to the development of this sector in an organised and systematic way.

While economic factors have been largely responsible for this change of emphasis, it is also informed by a heightened awareness of how critical early childhood experiences are, not just to children but also to the society in which they will grow up and become adults. The overlap between care and education has been acknowledged (DES, 1999). This is supported by a growing international consensus. The OECD report, Starting Strong, published in May 2001 stated:

' "care" and "education" are inseparable concepts and that quality services for children necessarily provide both.'

(OECD, 2001, p.10)

Changes in society, such as more mothers in the labour force, new family structures and our increasingly multicultural society, are placing higher and higher demands on the ECCE practitioner. The profession-alisation of the role, to include appropriate education and training and a structured career path, will lead to improved status for the sector and attract and retain high-calibre staff.

The organic nature of development of the ECCE sector presents major challenges. However, the sheer diversity of experience that has developed as a result has produced a rich environment for the production of a set of core values, ideas and principles to underpin standards for qualifications, training and practice.

The recognition and further promotion of leadership and vision within the ECCE sector is key to quality. At present there are real difficulties related to access and progression in education and training. These difficulties are in part related to the inflexibility of current education and training provision, which does not adequately take account of the busy working lives of ECCE practitioners. For example, at present all opportunities to avail of a degree in ECCE require full-time participation in a college-based course. There is therefore an urgent need for issues relating to access to education and training to be resolved.

The Model Framework of Education, Training and Professional Development for the ECCE sector in Ireland set out in these pages aims to produce reflective practitioners. Reflective practitioners in ECCE place children's concerns at the core of their practice. They assume a facilitative role and their espoused theories and specialist knowledge nonetheless leave them open to the possibility that in some contexts there is no single 'right' answer.

Policy context

In 1990, Ireland signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This was a vital initiative and has set the foundation for all subsequent developments in the ECCE sector. However, despite this move, the area of ECCE was not addressed legislatively until the passing of the Child Care Act in 1991. The regulations under this Act – Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 1996 and Child Care (Pre-School Services) (Amendment) 1997 – were the first of their kind and were unanimously welcomed by the ECCE sector, despite the fact that they did not require specific training and qualifications for providers. Since 1998 the following important documents have been published:

■ Strengthening Families for Life: Report of the Commission on the Family (Dept of Social and Family Affairs) 1998
■ Report of National Forum for Early Childhood Education (Dept of Education and Science) 1998
■ National Childcare Strategy Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare (Dept of Justice, Equality and Law Reform) 1999
■ Ready to Learn, White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Dept of Education and Science) 1999
■ Our Children Their Lives: National Children's Strategy (Dept of Health and Children) 2000

'ECCE is now a major policy issue'

These reports and white papers have served to bring Early Childhood Care and Education into the mainstream of policy making. A sign of its heightened status was the inclusion of ECCE in the Regional Operational Programmes of the National Development Plan 2000-2006 as a measure which is being funded by the Irish Government and the European Union Structural Funds.The Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme 2000-2006, which has an overall budget of €436.8 million, aims to:
 • Improve the quality of childcare
 • Maintain and increase the number of childcare facilities and places
 • Introduce a co-ordinated approach to delivery

The co-ordinated approach under this programme has been established with the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform assigned the lead role. In line with the recommendations of the Expert Working Group on Childcare, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has put in place a series of structures at national and local levels to bring the key players together to ensure the effective development of childcare.

These structures include:
■ The National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC)
■ The Inter-Departmental and Inter-Agency Synergies Childcare Group
■ Subgroups of the NCCC include:
 - The Certifying Bodies Subgroup
 - Advisory Subgroup (for children with special requirements, minority ethnic groups and Traveller children.)
 - Working Group on School Age Childcare
■ County/City Childcare Committees
 (see appendix 1)

The Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report (1999) acknowledged that among public submissions one of the most frequent comments was *'High quality training of childcare workers is essential'.* The report noted that the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, 1996 and Amendment 1997 did not contain guidelines for levels or type of qualifications for workers in the early years sector:
 'The recommendations in the Regulations of "appropriate experience in caring for children"

and/or "an appropriate qualification in childcare" have become understandably frustrating, both for workers currently employed in the childcare field and for employers. There is confusion as to what these terms actually mean, and what qualifications are "appropriate".'

(Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report, 1999, pp.24-29)

The report went on to note the lack of a national common standard or benchmark against which to measure these skills and knowledge.
 'There is no mechanism for accrediting this experience or the diverse training courses within the childcare profession or for establishing equivalencies for the purposes of employment or future training.'

(ibid. p.29)

One of the proposals of the National Children's Strategy in the following year was that:
 'A draft Framework will be developed to address the qualification, accreditation and certification for the childcare sector, the final version of which will be submitted to the National Qualifications Authority.'

(National Children's Strategy, 2000, p.29)

The work undertaken by the DIT/NOW[1] Early Childhood Project between 1996 and 2000 examined possible approaches to the development of a framework for qualifications. It looked at mechanisms to establish a national

standard at different levels which would facilitate the measurement of education and training courses in ECCE for equivalence, and the development and implementation of a system of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). An APL system is of value to those working in the sector who have had years of experience minding their own and other people's children, but who may not have achieved a nationally accredited qualification. It can facilitate access to education, training and continued professional development, which is essential to the future development of the ECCE sector. Initiatives such as that undertaken by FÁS in relation to APL will play an important role in any implementation of the core standard.

The model framework which is being presented here covers the education and training of those responsible for the care and education of children between birth and eight years. This range was decided upon after extensive consultation with the ECCE sector. It is, however, noted that service provision within the sector extends beyond the age of eight up to and including age 14 years. It is recommended that this framework is reviewed and further developed to reflect this broader age range once the deliberations of the Working Group on School Age Childcare have been completed. This review is anticipated to take place within the next two years.

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[1] *Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), New Opportunities for Women (NOW)*

Rationale

Demand for ECCE is likely to increase by between 25% and 50% by the year 2011 (The Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report, 1999). It will be important to build on the education, training and professional development of the existing ECCE sector in a way that maximises children's well-being, and the professional status and qualifications of the adults working with them. In the past, training evolved on a needs basis, usually in response to market forces or policy developments. The danger at present in Ireland is that market forces continue to skew the evolution of education and training provision to meet immediate needs, without taking account of the long-term vision of quality provision of services for children.

The most rigorous studies have shown that high-quality early education leads to lasting cognitive and social benefits in children, which persist through adolescence and adulthood (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1993; Woodhead, 1996; Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997). In turn, research has shown that professional education for practitioners is a major factor in achieving the provision of high-quality early childhood care and education services (Blenkin et al, 1996; Pascal, 1996; Abbott and Pugh, 1998; Feeney & Freeman, 1999; Moss, 2000).

Education and training have been identified as key elements in the development of any profession. In order to establish a clear and holistic framework all levels of training must be developed in a manner which recognises the diverse needs of the ECCE sector. The framework addresses a number of key issues which should inform the development of relevant education and training programmes for practitioners in the ECCE sector.

■ Occupational profiles for each stage of professional development
■ Core skills for each stage of professional development
■ Issues which relate to the facilitation of access, transfer and progression
■ Quality assurance

To sustain practitioners at higher levels and to develop the profession further, it is necessary to provide career paths which enable practitioners to:

■ Gain access to accreditation at all levels of qualifications
■ Avail of lifelong learning opportunities offering equitable access to professional development
■ Investigate career opportunities for graduates in a broadly defined ECCE sector
■ Stimulate, develop and build on existing body of knowledge in ECCE

In order to support the continued development of a sense of professional identity, it is important that all practitioners in the field acquire an agreed, appropriate level of training and education in the core skills and knowledge underpinning quality practice in ECCE. Once qualifications are standardised they can be compared with international equivalents, facilitating foreign nationals working here and Irish nationals working abroad. An ECCE framework of education, training and professional development should not be bound by traditions of what makes an effective qualification, nor should it focus on any specific type of qualification stream. The framework itself should be flexible, dynamic and open to change.

The development of this framework is crucial not only to the development of the profession and the professionals working in the sector, but also to the holistic provision of services to children which respond dynamically to their need for continuity of care and education over their entire childhood.

Profile of sector

Historically, the Irish State has had minimal involvement in the provision of ECCE services except in the case of child protection. The community and voluntary sector and the private business sector therefore have been largely responsible for the development of existing services. Development had been *ad hoc* and unregulated until the commencement of Part VII of the Child Care Act, 1991, in December 1996.

The exception to the State's limited involvement in the provision of early childhood services has been in the case of children who are disadvantaged or deemed to be at risk in some way. Health boards provide financial supports to certain pre-school services which cater for children who are regarded as being at risk or disadvantaged. This function is in keeping with the board's overall responsibilities under the Child Care Act, 1991 in regard to the promotion of the welfare of children and the provision of family support services. The Child Care Act, 1991 also empowered the Minister for Health and Children to make regulations in relation to pre-school services.

The Department of Education and Science is involved in providing early childhood education services in designated disadvantaged areas or to populations identified as disadvantaged. However, with the notable exception of the Rutland Street Pre-School Project opened in inner-city Dublin in 1969, little had been done in this regard until the advent of the Early Start Programme in 1994. This programme aims to offer a pre-school experience to three-year-old children for the academic year prior to their entry into primary education. Approximately 1,500 children are attending these Early Start Programmes for half-day sessions in 40 schools (DES, 1999).

It is worth noting that 'although a child is not required by law to attend school until s/he has reached his/her sixth birthday, virtually all five-year-olds and more than half (52%) of four-year-olds attend primary schools' (DES, 1999 p.21). This tradition, combined with low participation of mothers in the workforce may have resulted, in the past, in a lack of public concern about the value and importance of high-

quality early years services (Hayes, 1995). This has certainly changed in recent times as Ireland's rapid economic growth highlighted the crucial role that ECCE plays in facilitating parents' participation in the labour force (Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report, 1999).

The National Childcare Census, the first such undertaking of its kind in the State, published results on a county-by-county basis in 2000. The census surveyed 2,607 facilities, offering a total of 3,497 services. Categories included playgroup/pre-school, drop-in crèche, Montessori school, naíonraí, crèche/day care, after-school/homework club, parent and toddler group, workplace crèche. Since child-minding no more than three children is unregulated and therefore inaccessible to researchers, the Census did not include care by relatives, but acknow-ledged that this accounts for a large percentage of childcare provision.

Common themes were repeated in each county report:
■ There was a predominance of sessional and small-scale services.
■ Facilities were spread unevenly, with a particular shortage in rural areas.
■ Childcare provision was particularly poor for certain groups of children, e.g. the after-school age groups.
■ There was a broad diversity in the qualifications of childcare workers.
■ Many staff had no formal qualifications.
■ Salaries were extremely low in both sessional and full-day care, reflecting its very low status as a career.
■ There were very few male childcare workers, around 1% of those surveyed.
■ There was a dependence on students and volunteers as additional staff members. (source: ADM census, 2000)

The Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report noted similar findings to the Census. Many ECCE workers gained skills and knowledge through experience rather than through formal training processes. Work in the ECCE sector has not generally been well-paid or well-regarded. The low occupational status accorded to childcare has implications for the quality of provision. Low pay has led to difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff (Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report, 1999).

Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in ECCE in Ireland

Elements of the model framework

The framework being presented in this document attempts to embrace the diverse nature of both provision and practice in the ECCE sector in Ireland. The critical purpose of the framework is to allow those working in this sector to identify clearly where they are located in terms of their own professional development and also to make decisions about and plan for their future professional development within the sector.

The model framework has been designed to demonstrate that flexibility with regard to routes to achieving each stage in the profession is both essential and possible. Practitioners in the ECCE sector in Ireland have acquired learning in a variety of contexts, both formal and informal. It is vital to the future development of this sector that learning must be valued appropriately regardless of how it was acquired. Mechanisms for recognising and accrediting learning are key to ensuring that this framework becomes a reality.

The diagram on the right outlines the model framework. It identifies the two main sources of learning as
- that which is acquired through experience
- that which is acquired through education and training.
The model framework illustrates that it is possible to take a variety of routes within the framework to achieve a desired stage of professional development.

Model framework for education, training and professional development
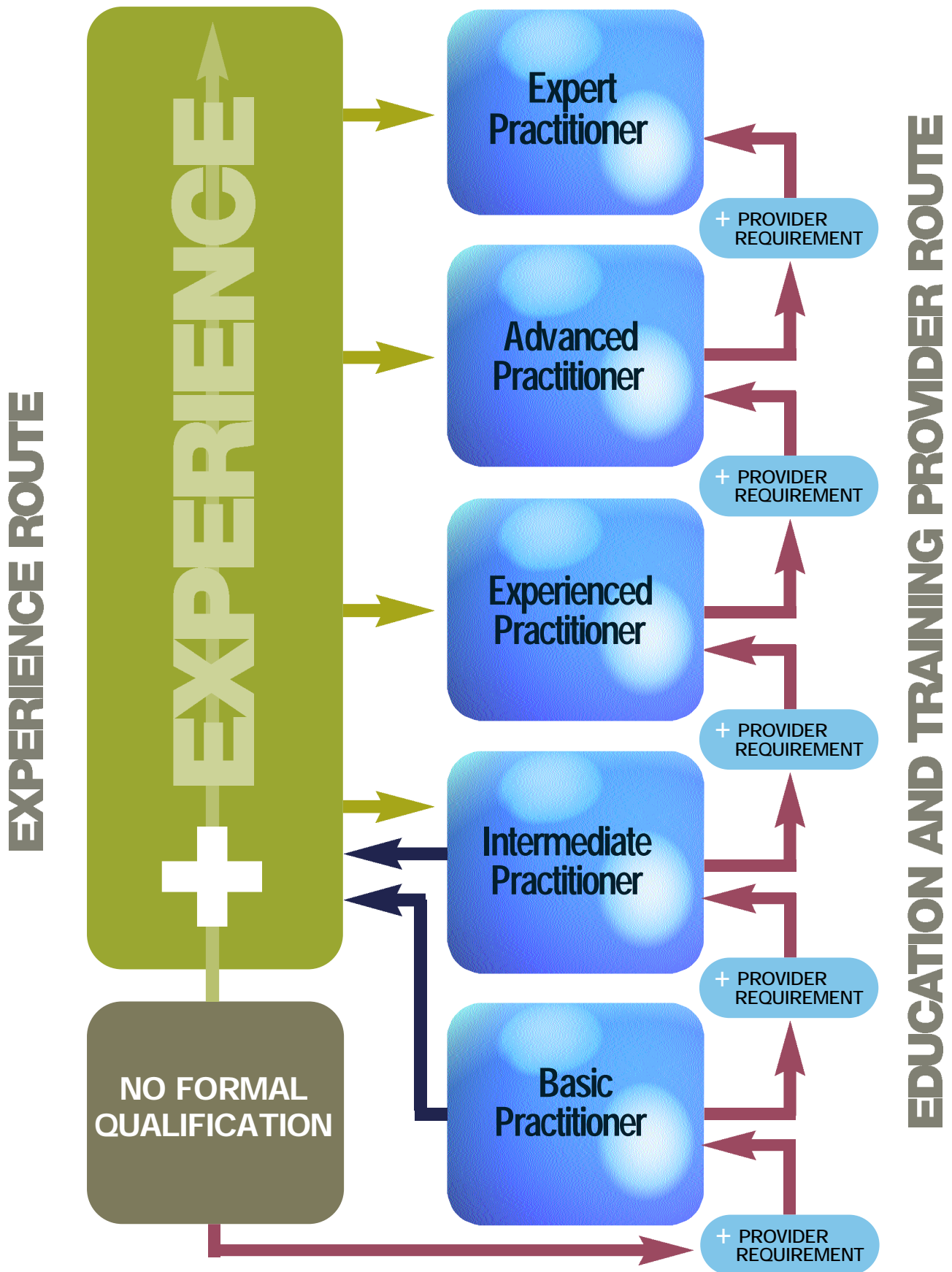
EXPERIENCE ROUTE

EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROVIDER ROUTE

EXPERIENCE +

NO FORMAL QUALIFICATION

Expert Practitioner

Advanced Practitioner

Experienced Practitioner

Intermediate Practitioner

Basic Practitioner

+ PROVIDER REQUIREMENT

+ PROVIDER REQUIREMENT

+ PROVIDER REQUIREMENT

+ PROVIDER REQUIREMENT

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'The core standard is a compilation of the skills and knowledge that are essential to ECCE practitioners at different stages in their professional development.'

At the heart of the proposed Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in the ECCE sector are core values and a core standard for the profession. The core standard is based on the agreed set of core values. These values provide an essential foundation for standards as they establish the common benchmarks for all practice in the sector. This facilitates the development of a unique professional identity for all practitioners whilst allowing for and respecting the diversity of service provision and professional practice which currently exists.

The core standard is a compilation of the skills and knowledge that are essential to ECCE practitioners at different stages in their professional development. They are common to all roles and provide a basis for self-assessment and reflection. They allow practitioners to determine areas of professional competence and areas for further growth and development. Early Childhood Care and Education is a profession which is based on a multidisciplinary approach. Therefore,

education and training of practitioners must be multidisciplinary in nature. The term pedagogy, literally 'the principles, practice, or profession of teaching' (Collins, 2000), is used in this context to refer to the professional practices of early childhood care and education. It has been described as '...the deliberate process of cultivating development within a given culture and society' (National Research Council, 2001, p.182).

The wheel diagram identifies six core knowledge areas. Each content area has many elements and recognises progressive levels of competency, which advance through the following stages:
■ Awareness
■ Acquisition
■ Application
■ Assessment and extension

Each area is equally important, interdependent and interrelated. They form the basis for the organisation and development of education, training and qualifications for the ECCE profession.

Areas of core knowledge and skills

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

COMMUNICATION ADMINISTRATION MANAGEMENT

PERSONAL, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

EDUCATION AND PLAY

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

HEALTH, HYGIENE, NUTRITION AND SAFETY
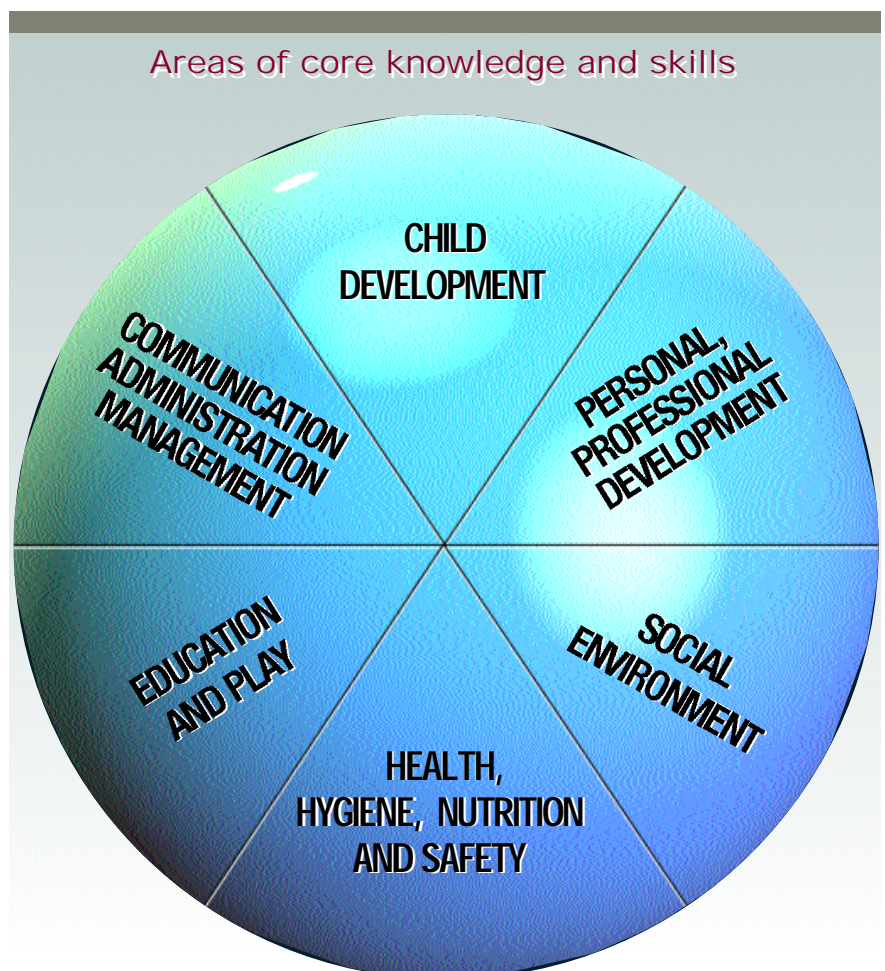
Core knowledge areas

Pedagogy in ECCE refers not only to an agreed base of shared knowledge but also
to practical experience, which incorporates opportunities for reflection and appreciation and understanding of the necessity of collaboration with other stakeholders in the sector, including parents and families.

Early childhood practitioners '*need to work in ways that fully involve and engage children and enable them to construct their own understanding*' (Siraj-Blatchford, 2000). This *'requires not only an initial education that covers the many different kinds of knowledge and understanding in the field of early childhood care and education but also continued professional development, including time to reflect on practice'* (Fisher, 2002).

Within this field of knowledge the following knowledge areas can be identified:

Child development
Including:
- The study of theories of development and learning, including the domains and stages of development, from conception through to age eight.
- The study of the process of development in both normative and atypical development.
- Study of the influence of environmental, biological, social, and cultural influences on growth and development.
- The roles and responsibilities of parents and early childhood educators in providing developmentally appropriate experiences to facilitate the potential development of each child
- Methods and importance of child observation.

Education and play
Including:
- Theories and processes of learning in early childhood.
- Approaches to curriculum for early childhood.
- Processes involved in curriculum development.
- The role and importance of play.

Social environment
Including:
- The significance of social knowledge and experiences to the development of social competencies in children, including the following social skills: initiating interactions; maintaining ongoing relationships; and resolving interpersonal conflicts.
- Roles and responsibilities of parents and educators in being sensitive and supportive in assisting in individual's development of social knowledge by planning stimulating and emotionally supportive environments and acting as role models.

Health, hygiene, nutrition and safety
Including:
- Knowledge of relevant theory and legislation related to promotion of welfare and well-being of children.
- Knowledge and ability to implement the relevant health safety and hygiene policies.
- Planning and promotion of a safe and secure environment.
- Knowledge of and ability to complete appropriate record-keeping procedures, e.g. documenting and reporting of accidents, procedures for reporting and recording of illness and child protection issues.

Personal / professional development
Including:
- Independent learning skills.
- Ability to identify and engage in opportunities for ongoing reflection and sharing of knowledge with colleagues and others.
- Development of key skills, e.g. literacy, numeracy, independent learning skills.

Communications management and administration
Including:
- Understanding of importance of interaction with babies and young children in ways that encourage them to communicate their thoughts and feelings.
- Planning an environment that provides materials and activities to promote communication skills.
- Maintenance of effective two-way communication between staff and families.
- Efficient record-keeping systems that provide confidential information about children and their families.

Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in ECCE in Ireland

The progressive nature of professional development

The essential skills and knowledge which constitute the core standard are multidisciplinary and recognise progressive stages of competency. This progression of professional competence evolves as a result of the interaction between theory and practice. Experience offers the practitioners the opportunity to continually achieve higher standards of competence.

Practitioner profiles

In order to develop a model framework for education, training and profssional development in ECCE it was necessary to first identify the practitioner profiles associated with each stage of professional development. These profiles were developed as a result of extensive consultation and research both nationally and internationally. The following table draws upon the work of the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS) . It provides generic descriptors of the different stages of professional development that have been identified within the ECCE sector. These then provide the basis upon which to develop the key tasks and responsibilities and core skills and knowledge outlined in the tables on pages 19-23.

Key tasks and responsibilities

Associated with each practitioner profile is a set of key tasks and responsibilities, which indicate the level of responsibility and a broad range of duties that may be required of a practitioner at each stage of professional development. Once again these have been based upon research and consultation. It is understood that practitioners at each stage of professional development may hold a wide variety of occupational roles. The key tasks and responsibilities have been designed to take account of this diversity and will, it is hoped, enable all practitioners to identify their own situation.

Importance of the core standard

The core standard is at the heart of the Model Framework and is key to the future development of the profession. The main benefits of developing the core standard are:

■ A mutually agreed standard is one of the principal means of co-ordinating a profession.

■ Colleges and other training providers can continue to provide education and training as before, ensuring that their standard matches or is equivalent to or exceeds the core standard.

■ Those who have a great deal of experience or have unrecognised training may now be acknowledged for what they know and can do, e.g. through mechanisms such as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL).

■ Flexible modes of learning, such as work-based training, may be facilitated and accredited.

■ Progression routes for practitioners into and from related professions may be facilitated (e.g. primary teaching, social work.)

■ Quality assurance mechanisms may be developed which are responsive to flexible delivery and accreditation of education and training programmes.

Table of occupational profiles and descriptors

Occupational profile	Intellectual skills/attributes	Processes	Accountability
Basic Practitioner	Elementary under-standing of core knowledge areas. Ability to apply solutions to familiar problems. Ability to receive and pass on infor-mation.	Ability to carry out routine tasks. Basic competence in a range of clearly defined operations.	Directed activity under supervi-sion. Reliance on external monitor-ing and quality control.
Intermediate Practitioner	Broad range of core knowledge with some depth. Ability to interpret and reflect on information. Well-developed range of practical skills.	Ability to carry out varied range of tasks in a limited range of different contexts.	Responsibility for own actions under direction. Some responsi-bility for quality of services within prescribed guidelines.
Experienced Practitioner	Broad range of core knowledge with greater depth. Ability to acquire specialist theoreti-cal knowledge in one area. Ability to access, evaluate, compare and interpret infor-mation. Well-developed range of skills and ability to employ in complex non-routine situations.	Ability to select from a broad range of skills appropriate to context. Present information to audience.	Operate with full autonomy with broad guidance/ evaluation. Responsibility for quality of services in accordance with specified standards. Limited responsi-bility for work of others.
Advanced Practitioner	In-depth under-standing of com-prehensive body of knowledge. Expertise in particular area of knowledge. Generate respons-es, demonstrating some innovation, to challenging situations. Analyse, evaluate and interpret a wide range of information.	Perform effectively in a wide range of contexts involving creative and non-routine activities. Use judgement in planning, selecting or presenting information, methods or resources.	Full autonomy and responsibility for own for actions and those of others. Responsibility for meeting required quality standards.
Expert Practitioner	Mastery of complex theoretical knowledge. Ability to critically evaluate knowledge, concepts, and practice. Expertise in research, policy development.	Apply diagnostic and creative skills in a wide range of situa-tions. Engage in planning, policy development, and management. Engagement in research, publication and dissemination of knowledge andskills.	Complete autonomy in professional activities. Responsibility for achieving per-sonal and group outcomes. Accountability for all decision-making.

'Mechanisms for recognising and accrediting learning are key to ensuring that this framework becomes a reality.'

The terms presented in the table are those agreed as working titles by the sector

Core values

Model Framework
for Education,
Training and
Professional
Development in
ECCE in Ireland

In Ireland professionalisation of the ECCE sector is an evolving process. The formulation of core values to underpin the development of standards for this evolving profession is an important step. As broad statements these values are more than expressions of good intention, they will function to underpin a set of principles, which can be developed as a code of ethics for the profession. Such a code must emanate from the profession itself and will take time and effort to develop. A code of ethics needs to be developed to guide the further development of good practice and professionalisation of the sector. This code will in turn reflect these core values.

Feeney and Freeman (1999) define core values as:
'Commitments held by a profession that are consciously and knowingly embraced by its practitioners because they make a contribution to society. There is a difference between personal values and core values of a profession.' (p.99)

A code of ethics, on the other hand, identifies practitioners' individual obligations based on the profession's collective responsibility, and is defined as:
'A document that maps the dimensions of the profession's collective social responsibility and acknowledges the obligations individual practitioners share in meeting the professional's responsibilities.' (ibid, p.99)

A code of ethics will include principles of professional conduct, which are:
'Rules included in a code of ethics that mark the line between acceptable and unacceptable professional behaviour.' (ibid, p.99)

One indicator of a quality childcare service is an effective management structure (Rodd, 1998). Effective and efficient management requires decisions to be made which are informed by ethical principles that have been accepted and endorsed by the early childhood profession. This should include a partnership approach between employers, staff and their unions and/or representative organisations.

In the context of early childhood, managing services in an ethical manner requires collaborative, consultative, communicative and respectful decision-making. This requires explicit principles and values reflecting the rights of children to high-quality care and education, which will foster their development in partnership with families.

In order to ensure that the ideals and principles that underpin best practice by ECCE professionals become integrated into everyday actions, these values need to inform and be embedded in training and education programmes for practitioners.

The following have emerged as a result of extensive research and consultation within a national and international context.

Core value statements for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland [1]

The Early Childhood Care and Education Sector values:

* Childhood in its own right.

* The rights of children, who are active agents in their own growth and development.

* Parents, guardians and family as the child'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 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.

[1] See Appendix 2 for explanatory notes

Occupational profiles and core standards

The following tables present the proposed core standard for education, training and professional development in the Early Childhood Care and Education sector in Ireland. It is anticipated that once the National Framework for Qualifications, which is currently being developed by the NQAI, is announced, appropriate awards and qualifications can be identified in respect of each practitioner profile.[1] Terminology related to the practitioner profiles has been adopted as working titles for this purpose. During the consultation phase to date, responses were made in respect of occupational roles which might be related to each practitioner profile. On the basis of these submissions it was evident that no consensus could be reached due to the varied and inconsistent interpretations of terminology. This difficulty with terminology also emerged during the national consultation process. Despite the fact that all the roles proposed at that time (Assistant, Childcare Worker, Supervisor, Manager and Specialist) were endorsed, qualitative feedback indicated that there was a need for further development and research on this issue within the sector (NCCC, 2001).

[1] *The NQAI has stated that in the interim the status of existing awards remains unchanged (NQAI, 2002).*

BASIC PRACTITIONER PROFILE

It is understood that the basic practitioner will act at all times under the direction and supervision of an experienced practitioner.

Key tasks and responsibilities

- Provide for the holistic needs of babies and young children at group and individual level

- Recognise the diverse needs of minority group children and families in the implementation of programme activities

- Observe and assist educators in recording babies' and young children's progress

- Assist with the implementation of policies and procedures in accordance with legislation and regulations

- Attend staff meetings

- Engage in learning opportunities to improve knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level

- Establish and maintain appropriate contact with parents and guardians

Skills and knowledge

CHILD DEVELOPMENT
- Elementary knowledge of the holistic way in which children (0-8) develop
- Elementary understanding of the importance of holistic development of babies and children (0-8)
- Ability to perform routine and directed tasks which support babies' and young children's basic developmental needs
- Ability to report on observations and reflect and share with supervisor and/or team

EDUCATION AND PLAY
- Elementary knowledge and skill in assisting with providing for opportunities and experiences that promote children's learning, development and well-being
- Ability to perform routine directed activities with play/educational materials for and with babies and children (0-8)

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
- Elementary knowledge of how environmental factors impact on children's learning and development
- Awareness of child protection issues
- Awareness and understanding of equality issues and different customs, cultures and family structures and child-rearing practices in society

HEALTH HYGIENE NUTRITION AND SAFETY

- Awareness of the hygiene procedures which need to be followed when working with babies and children (0-8)
- Ability to perform routine practical tasks in hygiene procedures necessary for babies and children (0-8)
- Elementary knowledge of principal health needs of babies and children (0-8)
- Ability to perform routine practical tasks in the care of an ill child
- Elementary knowledge of the importance of balanced nutrition for babies and young children
- Ability to prepare and serve food hygienically to meet children's needs
- Elementary knowledge of the safety precautions needed when caring for babies and children (0-8)
- Ability to perform routine practical tasks to support implementation of safety precautions

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- Basic self-awareness and self-management in a working situation
- Ability to interact with children
- Ability to identify own learning needs and to plan for oneself
- Co-operate with others in limited group working situations
- Awareness of basic professional conduct with regard to children, parents and colleagues

COMMUNICATION, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION
- Ability to communicate with adults and children and have a basic awareness of barriers to this communication
- Ability to ommunicate appropriately with families

SUPERVISED PRACTICE
Supervised practical experience amounting to a minimum of 160-300 hours in an ECCE service

INTERMEDIATE PRACTITIONER PROFILE

It is understood that a practitioner at this stage of professional development may take full responsibility for his/her own actions but will remain under supervision of a more senior practitioner

Key tasks and responsibilities

- Provide for the holistic needs of babies and young children at group and individual level under supervision
- Actively engage babies and young children in developmentally appropriate learning activities
- Promote and help maintain an organised, clean, safe, well-equipped and culturally sensitive learning environment (indoor and outdoor)
- Access and use resources to support diversity and assist in the implementation of an inclusive programme
- Assist with the implementation of policies and procedures in accordance with legislation and regulations
- Observe and record babies' and young children's progress
- Communicate concerns observed regarding children and their families to supervisor/senior personnel
- Actively participate in and contribute to team activities
- Establish and maintain appropriate relationships with guardians and families
- Engage in learning opportunities to improve knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level

Skills and knowledge

CHILD DEVELOPMENT
- Knowledge of the basic underlying theories on child development
- Knowledge of the holistic development of babies and children (0-8)
- Knowledge of atypical development in babies and children (0-8)
- Ability to provide for babies' and young children's holistic development
- Ability to carry out child observations, maintain records, practise reflection and evaluation and contribute to planning, implementing and evaluation of the services programme and the individual experiences of babies and children (0-8)

EDUCATION AND PLAY
- Knowledge of basic underlying theories on educational activity and play for babies and children (0-8)
- Ability to make outline developmental and activity plans, based on an appropriate curriculum for babies and children (0-8)
- Knowledge of and skill in programme planning, implementation and evaluation
- Ability to set up and introduce educational/play activities for children
- Awareness of the range of different models/systems in use in ECCE

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
- Knowledge of the importance of environmental factors and their impact on babies' and young children's holistic development
- Ability to perform varied tasks, some complex and non-routine, in the maintenance of the environment for babies and children (0-8)
- Knowledge of public services available locally and nationally for babies and children (0-8) and the ability to use these appropriately
- Ability to provide and use resources to support individual diversity and inclusion
- Ability to establish and maintain appropriate relationships with parents, guardians and families
- Awareness of equality issues and different customs, cultures and family structures in society and how these influence the education and care of babies and children (0-8)

HEALTH HYGIENE NUTRITION AND SAFETY
- Ability to perform varied practical tasks in the physical care of babies and children (0-8)
- Knowledge of the hygiene procedures which need to be followed by adults working with babies and children (0-8)
- Ability to perform varied hygiene procedures, some complex and non-routine, in the care of babies and children (0-8)
- Knowledge of the basic underlying principles of health care for children and early childhood care and education services
- Ability to perform routine tasks in the care of an ill child
- Ability to perform basic first aid procedures in an emergency with a child
- Knowledge of the basic nutritional needs of babies and children (0-8)
- Ability to plan and prepare a balanced diet for babies and children (0-8)
- Knowledge of basic safety procedures and local regulations with regard to ECCE services
- Ability to take appropriate responsibility for basic safety procedures and perform practical tasks, some varied and non-routine, to support these procedures
- Knowledge of child protection, policy, procedures and good practice

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- Self-awareness and a sensitivity as to how this affects interaction with young children
- Ability to manage oneself in a working situation and perform tasks with limited autonomy and responsibility
- Ability to manage one's own professional development
- Ability to collaborate with others in teamwork

COMMUNICATION, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION
- Ability to communicate effectively with adults and children, including awareness of barriers to communication and how these might be overcome
- Ability to communicate using literacy and numeracy skills
- Awareness of the range of methods of technical communication available and the ability to use at least some of these at a basic level, including a computer

SUPERVISED PRACTICE
- Supervised practical experience amounting to a minimum of 320 hours in an ECCE service

EXPERIENCED PRACTITIONER PROFILE

It is understood that an individual operating at this stage of professional development may operate autonomously and may have responsibility for the work of others.

Key tasks and responsibilities

■ Promote babies' and young children's development and well-being by planning appropriate and culturally sensitive learning environments (indoor and outdoor)

■ Develop long-term and short-term plans to meet the diverse needs of children both at group and individual level based on observations, experience working with the child and reflection

■ Identify babies' and young children's needs and plan for appropriate support within the service provided and with outside professionals, in conjunction with parents, guardians and families

■ Implement and keep a comprehensive ECCE recording system

■ Liaise with parents, guardians and families

■ Supervise and support staff working in the environment including induction of new staff

■ Implement comprehensive record-keeping for staff with reference to legislation and personnel information

■ Engage in learning opportunities to improve knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level

■ Actively participate in and contribute to team activities

■ Recognise and deal with discriminatory practices and incidents

Skills and knowledge

CHILD DEVELOPMENT
■ In-depth knowledge of underlying theories on child development
■ In-depth knowledge of babies' and children's overall holistic needs and development
■ In-depth knowledge of atypical development in babies and children (0-8)
■ Ability to plan a child-centred environment drawing on and integrating a wide range of ECCE skills and knowledge
■ Ability to carry out and record in-depth observations of babies and children (0-8)

EDUCATION AND PLAY
■ In-depth knowledge of underlying theories on educational activity and play for babies and children (0-8)
■ In-depth knowledge of a range of different models/systems in use in ECCE
■ Ability to develop, implement and evaluate a curriculum for babies and children (0-8)
■ Ability to devise, set up and introduce a wide variety of suitable educational/play activities
■ Ability to interpret and evaluate observations and plan for children's future learning

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
■ In-depth knowledge of social environmental factors and their effect on babies and children (0-8)
■ Knowledge of national social policy and current legislation and its implications for ECCE
■ In-depth knowledge and understanding of equality issues and different customs, cultures and family structures in society today; and the ability to take account of these when working with babies and young children
■ Knowledge of some of the methods available for improving adverse social environmental factors for babies and young children, including knowledge of the public services available locally and nationally and the ability to use these appropriately for the benefit of children
■ In-depth knowledge of and ability to implement child protection policy, procedures and practice
■ Ability to perform varied tasks, many of them complex and non-routine, in the maintenance of the environment (indoors and outdoors) for babies and children (0-8)

HEALTH HYGIENE NUTRITION AND SAFETY
■ In-depth knowledge of the nutritional needs of babies and children (0-8)
■ Ability to plan and prepare a balanced nutritional diet for babies and children (0-8)
■ Ability to perform basic first-aid procedures in an emergency with a child
■ In-depth knowledge of safety precautions and local regulations with regard to ECCE services for babies and children (0-8)
■ Ability to take responsibility for the enforcement of safety procedures within ECCE services for babies and young children and perform competently the tasks to support these procedures

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
■ Self-awareness and a sensitivity as to how this affects interaction with young children
■ Ability to manage oneself in a working situation where complete autonomy is required and take responsibility in the performance of tasks
■ Ability to reflect and manage continuing personal and professional development
■ Ability to collaborate with others in teamwork

COMMUNICATION, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION
■ Ability to implement and maintain an administrative system for managing the ECCE environment
■ Ability to implement and maintain the effective operation of the ECCE environment
■ Competency in communication with adults and children and ability to overcome barriers to communication
■ Knowledge and skills to supervise or guide others in the performance of their tasks
■ Ability to perform tasks within the parameters of professional conduct including relations with parents, guardians, babies, young children and colleagues
■ Knowledge of the broad range of ECCE practices in centres and the ability to evaluate these

SUPERVISED PRACTICE
■ Supervised practical experience amounting to a minimum of 500 hours in an ECCE service

ADVANCED PRACTITIONER PROFILE

It is understood that an individual operating at this stage of professional development may operate with complete autonomy and will have full responsibility for the work of others.

Key tasks and responsibilities

- Manage overall operation and maintenance of an ECCE service, e.g. Resource Manager, Finance/Administration, Personnel
- Formulate, implement and evaluate philosophy, policies and procedures
- Develop and evaluate programmes and activities
- Develop quality improvement strategies within a service to enhance the quality of experience for all children and staff
- Establish and maintain effective working relationships with all staff
- Mentoring and support of practitioners engaged in professional development
- Engage in learning opportunities to improve knowledge and skills at a personal and professional level
- Establish and maintain relationship with parents, families and guardians
- Liaise with outside agencies e.g. County Committees, Regulatory Organisations, National Government Organisations
- Facilitate pre-service and in-service education and training of ECCE practitioners
- Recognise and deal with discriminatory policies, procedures, practices and incidents

Skills and knowledge

CHILD DEVELOPMENT
- In-depth knowledge and understanding of child development theories
- Ability to describe in detail patterns in the holistic development of children
- Ability to apply theory of an area of knowledge in a professional practice context
- Ability to communicate and demonstrate the links between ECCE theory and practice
- In-depth understanding of the role of adults in the holistic development of the child
- Ability to use recorded observations and reflection on practice to develop long-term and short-term objectives and plans for the holistic development of individual children

EDUCATION AND PLAY
- Ability to plan, implement and evaluate a curriculum for babies and children (0-8)
- In-depth knowledge and understanding of a wide range of different models/systems in use in ECCE
- Critical awareness of the value of research in ECCE
- Ability to co-ordinate the development, implementation and evaluation of an appropriate curriculum for babies and children (0-8)

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
- Ability to liaise and maintain relationships in the wider environment including other professionals, management committees, local community and voluntary organisations and statutory bodies
- Knowledge of a range of methods available for improving adverse social environmental factors for babies and young children, including knowledge of the public services available locally and nationally and the ability to use these appropriately for the benefit of children
- Ability to develop, implement and evaluate initiatives to support the inclusion of all children and families in ECCE services

HEALTH HYGIENE NUTRITION AND SAFETY
- Ability to ensure the safety of children and adults in an ECCE environment
- Ability to take responsibility for the welfare and well-being of all children and adults in an ECCE service
- Knowledge and skill in the process of development, implementation and evaluation of policies and procedures in an ECCE service

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- Ability to reflect and critically evaluate self in relation to personal and professional development
- Ability to promote and support professional development of ECCE practitioners
- Critical awareness of the value of research in ECCE

COMMUNICATION, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION
- Knowledge and understanding of financial, administrative and personnel management theory and practice necessary for the effective operation of an ECCE service
- Ability to plan for and resource flexible ECCE services for children and families
- Ability to implement organisational structures ensuring that lines of authority and accountability are understood by all staff members
- Ability to supervise staff and support their development (including induction of new staff)
- Ability to put in place and maintain admission procedures and record-keeping systems relating to children, their families and the staff of the ECCE service
- Ability to identify and solve problems related to the effective operation of an ECCE service

SUPERVISED PRACTICE
- Supervised practical experience as appropriate

EXPERT PRACTITIONER PROFILE

Key tasks and responsibilities

- Provide consultancy for early years services
- Research at a practice and academic level and present findings
- Engage in research writing for publication
- Involvement in appropriate professional organisations
- Design, deliver and evaluate courses
- Mentoring and support of practitioners engaged in professional development
- Engage in continued professional development
- Advise on formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies on all aspects of ECCE, e.g. equality, curriculum, development, parental involvement
- Advocate for public policies and community services that are supportive of children, families and the ECCE sector
- Advise on programmes and policies that support positive personal and cultural identity

Skills and knowledge

CHILD DEVELOPMENT
- Mastery of a range of theories in relation to the holistic development of babies and young children

EDUCATION AND PLAY
- Ability to display mastery of a complex and specialised area of knowledge and skills in the field of ECCE

SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT
- Ability to contribute significantly to the processes of change in ECCE

HEALTH HYGIENE NUTRITION AND SAFETY
- Ability to develop, evaluate and evolve social policy in relation to the welfare and well-being of babies and children (0-8)

PERSONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
- Ability to critically review, consolidate and extend a systematic and coherent body of knowledge in the field of ECCE
- Exercise leadership in addressing professional practice issues in ECCE
- Ability to contribute significantly to professional practice
- Ability to reflect and manage continuing practice and professional development of self and others

COMMUNICATION, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION
- Ability to co-ordinate the effective operation of an ECCE organisation
- Ability to implement organisational structures ensuring that lines of authority and accountability are understood by all staff members
- Ability to develop and implement organisational structures to ensure the personal responsibilities of staff are identified and carried out
- Ability to engage in research, communicate findings and engage in critical dialogue
- Ability to collect, analyse, organise and critically evaluate information relating to all aspects of ECCE services
- Ability to develop, plan, implement and evaluate education and training programmes for ECCE practitioners
- Ability to support and supervise staff and students engaged in advanced stages of professional development

Access, transfer and progression

'Childcare and education services outside the compulsory school system - and particularly services for young children - are currently expanding in many countries. The demand for professional workers will inevitably increase. Research shows that staffing is one of the key quality factors in centre-based settings. Decisions made about staffing will be decisions made about the quality of services.'
(Oberhuemer and Ulich, 1997)

'The calibre and training of the professionals are the key determinants of high-quality provision.'
(Ball, 1994, p.16)

Context

The urgent need within the ECCE sector for a solution in relation to access, transfer and progression issues has been well documented (DJELR, 1999, OMNA, 2000a, NCCC, 2002). The Expert Working Group Report on Childcare noted that education and training developed in an *ad hoc* manner. In general, courses tended to evolve either in response to the needs of service providers or in line with particular educational philosophies (NCCC, 2002).

Existing regulations make no reference to specific qualifications for staff working in a pre-school service. Article 7 of the regulations states that 'A person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that a sufficient number of competent adults are supervising the pre-school children in the service at all times'. The explanatory guide to the regulations describes a competent adult as 'a person who has appropriate experience in caring for children under six years of age and/or who has an appropriate qualification in child care and is a suitable person to care for children.' (Child Care Act, 1991).

Despite this, in recent years the sector has taken advantage of courses developed and delivered by nationally accredited providers in partnership with the sector. Many practitioners have achieved a level 2 (FETAC) qualification. Anecdotal evidence would suggest that this level 2 qualification is being seen by some as a standard qualification in the sector. There is still, however, a great challenge to be met in respect of ensuring that all practitioners have achieved a basic appropriate standard of education and training in the field. There is little available data on the type and number of qualifications held across the sector. A survey was conducted in 1998 on behalf of the Expert Working Group on Childcare. This survey was updated in 2002 and revealed that, while there are positive aspects of provision, it is evident that there is a need to broaden provision for coverage at all levels. Most training was identified at FETAC level 2 or below (OMNA, 2002).

Anecdotal evidence from representative organisations in the ECCE sector would suggest that new challenges are emerging in relation to ensuring that those in senior occupational roles within the sector are adequately prepared and suitably qualified. Issues relating to the emerging professionalism of the ECCE sector have also come to the fore. Practitioners recognise the importance of continuing professional development (CPD) as a key element in the provision of high-quality experiences for children. As a result the demand for third-level and CPD courses is rising and will continue to do so.

It is important to note that many initiatives have been taken since 1998 that have contributed significantly to resolving problems with access and progression in education and training in the ECCE sector including:
■ IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation became an NCVA (FETAC) approved centre delivering Level 2 on a day-release basis nationwide. (To date 28 courses have been completed.)
■ The NVCO's consistent efforts to improve the education and training opportunities for their membership resulted in many exciting initiatives e.g: NCNA National Diploma in Nursery Management in UCD; Childminding Ireland/Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) have established a Registered Childminder certificate course which is accepted as credit towards WIT degree/diploma courses; and An Comhchoiste Reamhscholaíochta's FETAC Level 2 Child Care course through the medium of Irish.
■ FETAC Level 2 Childcare courses are available on a part-time basis through the Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) which is providing flexible learning opportunities for adults, especially those with less than upper second level education.
■ The development of the FÁS Childcare Traineeship Programme (FETAC Level 2). The elective module on Childminding Professional Practice for this programme has been important in offering flexible training opportunities to childminders. A

Level 3 Childcare Supervisor Traineeship programme is in development.
■ FETAC Level 3 Childcare Supervisor courses have also been developed and piloted.
■ Degree programmes in Early Childhood Care and Education are available in four institutions: NUI Cork; Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT); St Nicholas Montessori College, Dun Laoghaire; and Carlow Institute of Technology.
■ A number of institutions offering ECCE training at the higher education level have developed traditional academic routes up to doctoral level.
■ Flexible entry arrangements to degree courses in Early Childhood Care and Education have been established to facilitate access to mature students and graduates of FETAC Level 2 courses.
■ DIT developed and piloted a Continuing Professional Development course for Pre-school Officers.

Access

Despite the achievements of the sector to date, a major challenge facing the Early Childhood Care and Education sector is how to ensure that practitioners are able to access appropriate training and qualifications as and when they need to.

The diversity of the sector and the range of qualifications and experience of its staff indicate that the best way forward would be to introduce a credit system which would allow all learning to be recognised and achieve currency within the National Framework of Qualifications. Converting existing qualifications and experience into this new currency would be the next challenge.

The credits would serve to articulate the body of learning already achieved, allowing practitioners to identify gaps in their skills and knowledge. Credits could build to achieve a qualification or be used to gain access to a course of further study. A flexible, modular structure would meet the needs of ECCE practitioners best, and is also in line with the current philosophy of education and training, which sees learning as a lifelong process.

In a Government White Paper on

'...progression through an educational continuum from cradle to grave, with open boundaries between the worlds of home/work/education and provision for flexibility in learning sources.'

Adult Education, published in 2000, three core principles underpinning adult education were identified as follows:

- a systematic approach which recognises that the interface between different levels of education provision has a critical influence on learners' motivation and ability to access and progress in adult education and training. This requires that education policies be designed to embrace the life cycle and reflect the multiplicity of sites, both formal and informal, in which learning can take place.
- equality of access, participation and outcome for participants in adult education, with proactive strategies to counteract barriers arising from differences in socio-economic status, ethnicity and disability.
- inter-culturalism – the need to frame educational policy and practice in the context of serving a diverse population as opposed to a uniform one, and the development of curricula, materials, training, modes of assessment and delivery methods which accept such diversity is the norm.

The policy framework of the White Paper on Adult Education (2000) addresses the wider issue of realising, within our education system, a lifelong learning agenda which is described as a:

'...relatively seamless progression through an educational continuum from cradle to grave, with open boundaries between the worlds of home/work/education and provision for flexibility in learning sources.'

(White Paper on Adult Education, 2000, p.30)

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999 has provided the legislative framework to realise this agenda and facilitate the integration of the core principles into the Irish education system. The national qualifications, framework currently under construction by the NQAI, has been defined as:

'The single nationally and internationally accepted entity through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way and which defines the relationship between all education and training awards.'

(NQAI, 2002, p.11)

The publication of the outline qualifications framework by the NQAI is expected in the near future, along with a set of procedures to promote access, transfer and progression. These developments are warmly welcomed within the ECCE sector. In the policies and procedures document issued by the NQAI it is reassuring to note that the key values and principles which have informed the development of the proposed Core Standards for the ECCE sector find resonance with those contained in the discussion documents published about the development of the national qualifications framework.

In particular, the NQAI documents articulate a commitment to consultation with stakeholders at all stages of the development process *(ibid. p.20)*, equality and accessibility for all learners *(ibid. p.10)* and transparency and simplicity (*ibid.* p.16). These features will be of critical importance for those learners within the ECCE sector who have previously been marginalised by the formal education system.

Credit system and equivalence (transfer)

The *ad hoc* nature of the development of education and training programmes in the ECCE sector has resulted in a diversity of training and qualifications. In practice, many ECCE practitioners have gained skills and knowledge through their experience rather than through formal training programmes. A considerable number of experienced workers in the sector are at a disadvantage, in terms of advancement within the profession, due to their lack of formal qualifications.

A number of training programmes exist which do not currently provide nationally recognised certification to those who successfully complete the programme. New programmes continue to develop to meet immediate training needs in a sector where concerns about quality abound. While flexible modes of learning (including in-service training) exist in some contexts, these need to be developed in parallel with flexible modes of accreditation that provide full recognition for learners' achievements.

A credit system which facilitates the recognition of learning achievement, irrespective of time, place or mode of learning is one important tool in resolving these issues. It has the capacity to provide a systematic approach, reflect the multiplicity of formal and informal learning modes and remove barriers to participation faced by those who have not benefited from access to traditional qualifications. The capacity for a credit-based approach to qualifications to motivate learners in the ECCE sector has already been documented (OMNA, 2000a).

The lack of a national credit system has been a serious impediment to the appropriate recognition of learning achievement and of training programs providing a basis for the development of a credit-based framework of qualifications.

Professional status (progression)

The development of a professional identity for those working in the sector is inextricably bound with the need for recognition of the standards of knowledge, skill or competence acquired by learners, irrespective of their mode of learning. The need for professional identity within the sector is well established (OMNA, 2000, Expert Working Group on Childcare 1999, Coolahan, 1998).

The absence of a defined career structure and the lack of agreement on the meaning of levels within the sector have added to the confusion for learners, employers and providers alike. Different perceptions of how occupational roles, for example, relate to levels of qualifications are evident. Occupational roles generally determine levels of qualifications and training within the further education and training sector. Within higher education professional training and qualifications tend to be broader in nature and less role specific.

Such differences affect the capacity for learners to proceed from further to higher education and consequently affect their progression opportunities from more defined occupational roles (e.g. intermediate ECCE practitioner) to broader professional roles (e.g. in management, training or research). In similar vein, practitioners are also limited in their opportunities to articulate with other related professions such as national school teaching or youth work. A credit system based on agreed standards could be used to overcome these barriers by enabling individuals to move between different qualification types.

The recommendations of the Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare include the following:

■ A national framework for qualifications in Childcare should be developed in consultation with the proposed National Childcare Management Committee.
■ The National Qualifications Framework for Childcare should provide progressive pathways of awards, which can be achieved through formal and informal education and training programmes or through the accreditation of prior learning.

■ The future development of the ECCE sector should aim to achieve the following target that *a minimum of 60% of staff working directly with children should have grant-eligible training of at least three years at post-18 level. It should be modular in design. All staff who are untrained to this level should have access to such training, including on an in-service basis.* (Target 26 of the European Commission Network on Childcare Action Programme Quality Targets in Services of Young Children.)

These recommendations provide a focus and direction for the National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee and its sub-groups. The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) establishes a role for sectoral bodies in informing the Authority (NQAI) of the education, training, skills and qualifications requirements of the sector. The NQAI is to promote practices in education and training that meet those requirements. These provisions provide the opportunity to the NCCC to promote the objectives of its strategy by fully exercising its role in informing the NQAI and FETAC and HETAC, who will set standards for awards, of the needs of the sector thereby paving the way for full professionalisation.

Flexible learning

Work-based learning

The term 'flexible learning' denotes an approach that is based on accessibility and variety, where the learner or provider is able to vary pace, mode, content or location of learning. The principles of flexible learning inform many contemporary professional development programmes (especially within the health care sector) and have been identified as follows:

■ *Centrality of the learner, whose confidence is developed by removing barriers in learning*

■ *Recognition that profitable learning takes place in many situations*

■ *Variety in mode, location and delivery of professional development opportunities*

■ *Application to practice, encouraging consolidation of learning wherever achieved*

(Flexible Learning Development Centre, 1998)

In order to benefit fully from participation in flexible programmes any credits gained in one setting should be capable of transfer to others. For this to be realised, agreement on a national credit system is an essential prerequisite. Flexible routes to education, training and qualifications will be essential within the ECCE sector to enable future growth and development.

' "Programme of education and training" means any process by which learners may acquire knowledge, skill or competence and includes courses of instruction, apprenticeships, training and employment..'.

Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, Sec. 2(i)

This definition of 'programme' within the Act recognises the workplace as one setting in which learning takes place. All relevant provisions of the legislation also relate to programmes which are provided in places of employment or within the community. It is now well recognised that skill shortages (both in terms of new entrants to the workforce as well as the skills of existing workers) within the ECCE sector are a major barrier to sustainable growth. The shortage of continuing professional development opportunities within the workplace also represents a barrier to personal professional growth for the individual. There is a stated policy commitment that flexible education and training options will be progressed, allied with a focus on addressing barriers to participation of those in the workplace in ongoing education and training (White Paper on Adult Education, p.18).

The provisions of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999, and the redefinition of 'programme' represent an important opportunity to promote and ensure the accreditation of workplace learning. Again, if individuals are to fully benefit from work-based learning, then any credits gained need to be recognised and transferable to other contexts, further highlighting the need for a comprehensive credit system.

Work-based learning has been identified within the ECCE sector as a valuable mechanism for overcoming barriers to access (FAS, 2001, OMNA, 2000).

'...profitable learning takes place in many situations.'

Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)

'"Learner" means any person who is acquiring or who has acquired knowledge, skill or competence.'
Qualifications (Education and Training) Act, 1999, sec 2(i)

The above definition of 'learner' acknowledges that learning is the outcome of a process that can take place at any time, including the past. Thus, the equal status of prior and current learning is underwritten by the new legislation. APL procedures, developed as part of the OMNA project, have enabled experienced ECCE practitioners to gain a significant number of credits towards a national award. Appropriate learning programmes or self-directed learning strategies could then be put in place to enable candidates to meet the standards for the remaining modules required for the qualification. (See details on APL pilot project for ECCE workers in Co. Clare, reported in OMNA, 2000.)

APL enables learners to gain formal recognition and credit for learning they have acquired in a range of settings, generally outside formal programmes. The experience gained as a result of the OMNA project is of particular relevance, not just to the ECCE sector but also as a model which could be used in other contexts. The need for accepted and agreed core standards as a prerequisite to APL has been highlighted. The process of establishing equivalence between diverse modes of learning, as part of that project, provides a valuable model for establishing benchmarks for the future credit rating of different training courses. The process and outcomes are reported extensively in the final report of the OMNA project (OMNA, 2000).

The importance of procedures which facilitate the award of credit for prior learning is well established and the experience of projects, designed to provide for the accreditation of the prior learning of ECCE practitioners, has been testament to the current difficulties. The need for flexible learning options, however, in conjunction with credit for prior learning, was clearly established by the experience of OMNA, FAS and NCVA (now FETAC). This suggests that a credit system, on its own, will not meet the needs of learners who wish to meet the standards for qualifications when seeking recognition of prior learning. Thus, while the availability of modular and credit-based awards is an essential requirement for the effective implementation of APL practices, it needs to be part of a comprehensive policy commitment to practices, procedures and modes of provision which facilitate lifelong learning.

Summary

It is apparent from this review that the ECCE sector has much to gain from the realisation of the National Framework for Qualifications and Training. It must be restated, however, that procedures to facilitate access, transfer and progression are essential for a sector whose members are experiencing such dynamic change.

The ECCE sector has demonstrated through its commitment to national initiatives that it is anxious to resolve the identified deficits with regard to qualifications and training for practitioners. These initiatives have been extensively documented (OMNA 2000, 2001, FAS 2001) and are available for consideration by the NQAI, the national awarding bodies, FETAC and HETAC and indeed all providers of education and training for the ECCE sector in Ireland.

Quality assurance for a National Qualifications Framework
- a role for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector

'...the pursuit of excellence which has the capacity to transform.'

A quality system

'Quality needs to underpin the setting of award standards by the Authority ... To achieve this, planned and systematic actions are necessary to provide confidence in the system.'

(NQAI, 2002a, p.16)

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. Good quality assurance gives us confidence in the stated outcomes. In order to set these standards, benchmark principles and core values need to be established. The principles proposed by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) are 'equality and accessibility, comprehensiveness and coherence, transparency and simplicity, quality, and relevance' (NQAI, 2002a p.6). Values specific to the ECCE sector are set out in the core values statements. These reflect a fundamental concern for the quality of the experience of the child. In addition, the Occupational Profiles and Core Standards for the ECCE sector

identify the key tasks and responsibilities for the various practitioner profiles, together with the skills and knowledge required to fulfil those roles. It is hoped that these key statement will assist the NQAI and the awarding bodies FETAC and HETAC in developing a framework of awards for the sector.

Quality in the abstract is notoriously difficult to define, though stakeholders in the ECCE sector are in agreement that it should permeate all aspects of the education and training system and should be regarded not as a finite goal, but as an ideal which professionals consistently pursue. Some considerations which could be applied to performance within the ECCE sector as a whole are:

■ Quality as exceptional - something special or distinctive, linked to notions of excellence which is relative and unattainable by most

■ Quality as perfection - the achievement of consistent flawless outcomes, thus democratising quality as attainable by all

■ Quality as fitness for purpose - fulfilling a client's needs or desires

■ Quality as value for money - return on investment, where if the same outcomes can be achieved at a lower cost, then the criteria for quality have not been met

■ Quality as transformation - change and improvement, whether in terms of enhancement of service, empowerment of learners/practitioners or the development of new knowledge[1]

■ Quality as accountability - particularly important where the safety and welfare of children is concerned.

The notion of quality as 'fitness for purpose' provides a perspective for evaluating the capacity of providers of education and training to fulfil their mission. The fundamental challenge for providers of education and training is to determine what the appropriate mission should be.

Confusion about the notion of quality in education and training often arises because attempts are made to include the assessment of different interest groups into one single measure. This overlooks the separate interests of three distinct groups: those who pay for it, those who are engaged in the process and those who benefit from the outcome. Ideally, the consensus on a definition of quality would be: the pursuit of excellence which has the capacity to transform.

In an education and training context, and particularly in the ECCE sector, there is a need to assure consistency of outcomes within diverse systems. Diversity presents particular challenges to those charged with the task of maintaining confidence in the quality of education and training in both the further education and training systems. Setting criteria for quality which allow for diversity and flexibility in modes of learning is of central concern to the ECCE sector.

At the chalk-face, quality assurance is most effectively achieved by making the notion and practice of quality an essential part of day-to-day activities for everyone in the organisation. Internal systems focus on the promotion of:

■ good practice

■ devolution of responsibility - professional development of personnel

■ improved channels of communication - teamwork

■ transparency to users of the system

■ efficiency and cost effectiveness

The currency of awards and confidence in the education and training system will depend on the appropriate balance between internal and external quality assurance processes. In the particular case of the ECCE sector, the future quality of childcare in the country hinges on the adequacy of these processes.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that quality cannot be imposed. It has to be stimulated and nurtured. Partnership is important. The central involvement of all stakeholders in a system which assesses the quality of awards as well as the quality of practitioners' performances and of individual institutions will be critical to its development (Hayes, 2002 NCNA presentation).

A role for sectoral bodies within a quality system

'...decisions need to be made and matters resolved in a consistent manner as close as possible to those most affected by them... The Authority will establish relationship with all stakeholders.'

(NQAI, 2002, p.23)

The Qualifications (Education and Training) Act (1999) establishes a clear role for sectoral bodies in informing the NQAI, FETAC and HETAC of the education, training, skills and qualifications requirements of the sector.

For the ECCE sector the establishment of the National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee provides a forum that includes a wide range of statutory and non-statutory organisations involved in the ECCE sector. The NQAI has indicated that it will engage with sectoral bodies such as the NCCC. The NCCC would seek to participate in the consultation process being undertaken by the NQAI. The NCCC has already contributed to the debate by making a submission to the NQAI and participating in the forum organised by the NQAI in February 2002. The model framework presented here will, it is hoped, be regarded as a key contribution to the development of a national qualifications framework for the sector and to the setting of benchmarks for the range of quality assurance processes required to underpin the framework.

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[1] *These first five points are derived from Harvey L. and Knight P. T. (1996) Transforming Higher Education Buckingham: Open University Press.*

Accreditation of awards

'One of the objectives of the NQAI is to establish and promote the maintenance and improvement of the standards of awards and awarding bodies.'

(NQAI, 2002)

Award accreditation generally involves two related processes: the accreditation of an award and the accreditation of credits towards an award or award type. Accreditation processes ensure that awards have a purpose and a relationship to one another which is clear, coherent and readily understood by learners and employers. In the context of lifelong learning they should be designed to provide opportunities to learners to advance their achievements.

The Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development in ECCE represents a set of agreed standards against which awards for the sector can be referenced. The requisite skills and knowledge identified for each occupational profile in the sector, from basic to expert practitioners, represents the outcome of lengthy and ongoing consultation process with the sector. Identification of areas of 'competence' as a separate category for classification should present little difficulty once the distinctions between each category are clearly elaborated.

The external quality assurance of a national credit system will be an important function of the NQAI, where its role would be to ensure that all users of the system were operating it effectively, and that there was confidence in credit as the currency of the framework.

Accreditation of providers of education and training

Accredited providers should be able to demonstrate that they have appropriate purposes and have the resources needed to accomplish their purposes. Accreditation processes should be able to determine and monitor the extent to which they are accomplishing their purposes.

Given the diversity of learning opportunities within the ECCE sector, accreditation of providers of education and training will play an important role in assisting prospective learners in identifying the training and education options suited to the learner's career path. It can also provide important information for authorities responsible for funding the development of the education and training capacity of the sector.

The core values and the model framework contribute greatly to the establishment of relevant criteria for providers of education and training in the ECCE sector. For example, accredited providers need to demonstrate the capacity to promote the 'whole child perspective' articulated in the National Children's Strategy, show respect for diversity and demonstrate the highest standards in health and safety.

Where training is provided in the workplace, criteria for accreditation could also draw on the standards for a quality ECCE service. The range and diversity of organisations now involved in providing learning environments presents great challenges to well-established practices of institutional evaluation, review and accreditation. As well as the workplace, the range includes schools, further education colleges, community workshops, higher education institutions, the voluntary sector and virtual learning organisations. Ensuring access to awards for all learners involves having appropriate accreditation processes in place.

Accreditation of programmes - validation

Validation processes may be carried out internally (by organisations deemed to have the capacity to do so), externally by an awarding body or a combination of both. As with institutional accreditation, internal validation of a course/programme should precede any external validation. A review of international practice suggests that where external programme validation is carried out by an awarding body it generally focuses on two main elements: a) the curriculum design of the programme, b) the capacity of the organisation to deliver the particular programme.

Assessment and certification of learning achievement

Certification is usually based on some combination of internal and independent/external assessment carried out by the awarding body or others on its behalf. External verification of internal assessment is essential to maintain the confidence of learners, employers, other institutions and the public. This confidence is central to maintaining the currency of national awards, irrespective of how and where the learning has taken place. In the case of Early Childhood Care and Education professional qualifications must have a minimum amount of supervised practice built in. Assessment must therefore take account of this dimension of professional education and development.

FETAC and HETAC have inherited a wealth of experience and expertise in the operation of external monitoring and moderation systems which were developed and implemented by NCVA and NCEA and FAS. The professionalism and independence of external examiners represents the bedrock of a national certification system. Any assessment strategy should involve an appropriate balance of continuous and summative assessment. Internal assessment should be verified by external examination or moderation. The Core Standards (with Occupational Profiles) provide the basis for the selection of appropriate assessment techniques.

Conclusions

'Meeting the needs of learners was the central driver for the establishment of the National Qualification Authority of Ireland. Learners are the critical group who will benefit from the development of a national framework of qualification and from the implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression.' NQAI, 2001, p.15

Keeping learners centre-stage remains the challenge in the future development of a framework of qualifications. Learners will only benefit from the development of a framework if the awards they gain enjoy a level of recognition that opens opportunities for lifelong learning and continued professional development. To this end, the development of confidence-building quality assurance measures to underpin the framework will be critical to its design and effective implementation. In the interests of building confidence, the involvement of stakeholders and sectoral bodies will be critical in the process of developing and maintaining quality standards for all aspects of the framework. The challenge for such bodies will be to ensure that they effectively represent the interest of learners and practitioners as well as those of the providers of education and training within the sector.

The National Childcare Co-ordinating Committee is committed to playing its role in supporting and advising the NQAI and the awarding bodies FETAC and HETAC in the task of establishing a framework of qualifications for the Early Childhood Care and Education sector. The pursuit of the goals of equity and equality of opportunity, which underpin the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group Report, is wholly consistent with that of keeping the learner at the centre of the strategy.

The assurance of quality provision of ECCE services should be the right of all children in Ireland. The education, training and professional development of ECCE practitioners will play a key role in making such an assurance a real and practical possibility.

This document represents a significant commitment by the ECCE sector in Ireland to invest in education, training and professional development and it is to be hoped that statutory bodies and policy makers respond positively to this commitment, which holds the promise of reward in the realisation of each individual child and ultimately of society as a whole.

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Glossary of Terms

Assessment
The process of gathering information to make decisions.

Autonomy
Control of one's actions/performance; self-responsibility.

Childcare
See ECCE.

Child-centred environment
Place where the care and education needs of a child or children 0-8 years are catered for.

Code of ethics
A set of principles, rules or behaviour of a particular group, profession, or individual.

Code of practice
A set of principles or rules that make a public statement about what is an acceptable and ethical way of working defined by a particular group, profession or individual. These principles will also provide a framework for good practice.

Culture
The package of customs, traditions, symbols, values, phrases and other forms of communications by which one can belong to a community. Culture is the way we learn to think, behave and do things.

Curriculum
A curriculum consists of all those activities designed or encouraged within an organisational framework to promote the development of the student.

Disability
Impaired ability as a result of a physical, sensory, learning, or emotional condition. People with disabilities are not handicapped by their condition, but by prejudice, lack of accessibility, and discrimination. The term handicap refers to the consequences of society's barriers. 'Disability' is the chosen terminology of this minority group.

Discrimination
Policies, practices or behaviour that lead to the unfair treatment of individuals or groups because of their identity or their perceived identity. Prejudices translated into action become discrimination.

Diversity
The non-homogenous (multicultural) nature of society, which includes many and evolving minority groups as well as the dominant community in society.

Diversity education
Is used as a general term rather than identifying a particular approach, but encompasses the range of approaches which share the central concept of anti-racism.

ECCE
Day-care facilities and services for pre-school children and school-going children out of school hours. It includes services offering care, education and socialisation opportunities for children to the benefit of children, parents, employers and the wider community. Thus services such as pre-schools, naíonraí, day-care services, crèches, playgroups, childminding and after-school groups are included, but schools (primary, secondary and special) and residential centres for children are not. See Childcare.

ECCE centre
A place which is specially run to cater for the care and education needs of groups of children 0-8 years.

Environment
The experiences, conditions, objects, and people which directly or indirectly influence the development and behaviour of the child (including indoor and outdoor settings).

Equality
The concept of equality between individuals involves respect for identity, both personal and cultural. Equitable treatment, such that all individuals can participate in society to the best of their ability, is the outcome to be achieved. It recognises that all individuals are not the same and may require unequal measures in order to achieve equity.

Equal access
Opening up access for every child and family to full participation in ECCE services.

Minority group
Any minority community or culture within the larger society.

Multicultural education
Learning experiences that help young children become more aware of and appreciate the commonalties as well as the diversity of various cultural and ethnic groups.

Multicultural Society
A community of people which includes a variety of minority cultures and ethnic groups.

Multidisciplinary team
A team of professionals with a variety of different skills working together for a common aim.

Practitioner
A person who practices a profession or art.

Professional (adjective)
Incorporating a code of practice accepted generally by members of the profession.

Professionals (noun)
Individuals who have internalised the knowledge base of their particular field and can implement this knowledge in appropriate practice.

Professional development
The ongoing updating of skills and knowledge that is required for successful professional practice.

Prejudice
A pre-judgement, an attitude, opinion or feeling formed about a person, group or sex without adequate knowledge, thought or reason. It may be a positive, negative, hostile or rigid view towards a person or group.

Values
The principles and beliefs of a person or a group.

STRUCTURES IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CHILDCARE POLICY

In accordance with the recommendations of the Expert Working Group on ChildcareServices, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform has put in place a series of structures at national and local levels to bring the key players together to ensure the effective development of childcare.

These structures include

- The National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC)
- The Inter-Departmental and Inter-Agency Synergies Childcare Group Subgroups of the NCCC include
- The Certifying Bodies Subgroup
- Advisory Subhroup (for children with Special Requirements, Minority Ethnic Groups and Traveller Children) to the NCCC
- Working Group on School Aged Childcare
- County / City Childcare Committees

The National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee (NCCC)

Chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, this Committee oversees the development of an integrated childcare infrastructure throughout the country.
Membership comprises representatives of the statutory and non-statutory sectors including the Social Partners and the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations.

The Inter-Departmental and Inter-Agency Synergies Childcare Group

The Group was established in early 2000. Chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the Group ensures that all the Government Departments and State Agencies with an interest in or funding for Childcare work strategically together.

The Group's role was to be a forum in which the various Government Department and State Agencies with a function in childcare could meet to exchange information on the schemes available and to look at ways in which duplication of funding could be avoided.

The Certifying Bodies Sub-Group

This Group has been asked to develop a draft framework to address qualification, certification and accreditation issues in childcare on behalf of the NCCC. It is chaired by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

Advisory Subgroup (for Children with Special Reqirements, Minority Ethnic Groups and Traveller Children)

The group has been established to examine the work of the NCCC with regard to the childcare needs of children with special requirements and children of minority ethnic origin including Traveller children and to proof the work of the sector on issues such as poverty, equality and diversity.

The Working Group on School Age Childcare

The NCCC can also establish other working groups to address particular issues. One such group is the Working Group on School Age Childcare. This working group is preparing proposals on the further development of school-age childcare services on an all-year-round basis.

City and County Childcare Committees

Background

County Childcare Committees have been established in 33 counties and cities to develop a co-ordinated strategy for childcare provision within their area.

Each County Childcare Committee has been asked to prepare a five-year Strategic Plan for the development of childcare services to address the specific childcare needs of its own area. This strategy should set out the framework for the development of childcare based on a shared vision and analysis of the needs within the county.

Core value statements for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland and explanatory guides

The ECCE sector values:

■ Childhood in its own right.

Childhood is valued as a critical stage in development. All children are entitled to experience childhood unconditionally.

■ The rights of children, who are active agents in their own growth.

This value is in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the National Children's Strategy (2001). Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners need to value listening to children as the central core of their practice. Their voices should be listened to and their views on issues that affect them heard and valued. The best interests of the child are the primary consideration in all policies, actions and decisions. They should support children and give them opportunities to express their views. The views of children must be taken into consideration when decisions are made about matters that affect them. Children's opinions and interests should also be considered when planning programme activities.

■ Parents, guardians and family as the child's primary source of well-being.

This value acknowledges the importance of the parents' role in the child's life and is informed by Article 42 of the Irish Constitution. Open and respectful partnership between families and practitioners is the expected norm, in the best interest of the child, the family and the practitioner The nature of the relationship between practitioners and parents is one of partnership, whereby children are cherished, respected and supported. Openness and respect for parents' views, their child-rearing practices and family traditions will maximise harmony between the home and care environments. Families should feel comfortable that their child's cultural identity is given due recognition. Communication between practitioner and family needs to be two-way and accessible for this partnership to work well and to ensure continuity for the child.

■ **Professional development as central to good practice.**

Education and training is valued as a means to ensure quality practice and as a mechanism and measure of ongoing professional development. ECCE practitioners need to seek out and keep up to date with new approaches, theories and thinking, as the profession continually develops both nationally and internationally.

■ **Role of the practitioner as the facilitator of enhanced well-being and development of the child.**

Good practice requires reflection on personal views, practice and theoretical approaches. The reflective practitioner is one who frequently considers her or his style of working. By drawing on new information, ideas and opinions, she/he will adapt and develop new ways of working. Seeking support and advice from fellow practitioners and other sources such as professional bodies, advisors, professionals in other disciplines, parents and families will help resolve queries or problems and contribute to the ongoing development of good practice. Practitioners should be supported in reflecting on their work in the interests of good practice. Links should be developed with other related agencies and disciplines to avail of up-to-date knowledge or support regarding issues which practitioners face in their work. Although there are many stakeholders in the childcare sector, the child's interests are paramount and protection of children's rights is fundamental to the role of ECCE professionals.

■ **Diversity by acknowledging and promoting each child's and each adult's individual, personal and cultural identity.**

Diversity can be described as differences in terms of disability, skin colour, culture, ethnicity, race, religion, language, gender and other background factors. ECCE practitioners' respect for difference applies to curriculum design and delivery, selection of materials and equipment, staff training and development, all interaction within the setting, and all written documentation. Every child attending an early childhood setting should be able to feel a sense of belonging and should be encouraged to recognise and value his or her personal and cultural identity throughout the activities and interactions. Children are not all the same. Adults play an important role in shaping children's attitudes, by providing accurate explanations and information, by challenging prejudice and discrimination and as role models. The learning environment should depict positive images that reflect a range of backgrounds, cultures and minority groups, in realistic, non-stereotypical, everyday contexts.

■ **Equality of access and participation in services.**

This value asserts that early childhood services need to be inclusive. There should be no barriers to access and participation in ECCE services for any child on any grounds. Equal participation includes planning and monitoring of programme activities and ensures that all children receive adequate support to participate fully. Policies should be equality proofed at the planning stage and implementation procedures monitored on a continuing basis to ensure equitable practice.

■ **A positive approach to Irish language and culture.**

This value complements the value on equality and diversity. It places the ECCE sector in an Irish context and reflects the constitutional position of the Irish language. It should be noted that the value does not require ECCE practitioners to be able to deliver their service through the medium of Irish.

■ **Safety and Welfare - the right of children to protection from any form of abuse, neglect and discrimination.**

This value reflects a commitment to the physical and emotional wellbeing of the child. We create and maintain a safe physical environment for children and seek to eliminate or minimise any risk to children's health. Adults working with children should always be respectful and protective of children and their behaviour and attitude should never degrade, exploit, endanger, intimidate or harm children, either physically or psychologically. However, due consideration must also be given to the importance of providing appropriate 'risk opportunities' for children to facilitate positive physical and emotional development. Children First (1999) issued by Department of Health and Children will inform appropriate practice and provision in relation to child protection issues.

■ **Confidentiality - 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**

The principle of confidentiality concerning personal, private or sensitive information about children, families, staff (including informal communications within the setting itself) is respected at all times and throughout all procedures. This principle should govern access to information and record keeping, in accordance with statutory regulations. Confidential information must only be discussed or shared where appropriate to the needs of the child and for the purpose of child protection.

■ **Child Development and Curricula - Experiences and activities which support learning and allow children actively to explore, to experience, to make choices and decisions and to share in the learning process**

Experiences and activities which support learning should meet individual developmental needs across the physical, intellectual, linguistic, emotional and social domains and allow children actively to explore, to experience, to make choices and decisions and to share control of the learning process. Practitioners working with groups of children should be mindful of the importance of catering for difference. Adults should have a flexible, adaptable approach to planning and implementing activities for children. Having a child-centred approach will ensure that all activities have a clearly beneficial purpose and outcome for the child. Children's abilities and interests are observed and observations inform curriculum planning and development.

■ **Play as the natural, constructive mode of children's interactions with their peers, adults and environment**

This value emphasises the fact that education and caring are inextricably linked and cannot therefore be treated separately. Learning is occurring whenever a child observes, listens, interacts, plays or actively carries out an activity in a variety of indoor and outdoor environments. Children are active learners who participate in the wider educational process and need to be facilitated to learn independently.

Membership of the Certifying Bodies Subgroup

Childcare Directorate, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
- Michael Holohan (Chair)
Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT)
- Nóirín Hayes, Stuart Garvie
FÁS
- Frank Nugent
Further Education Training Awards Council (FETAC)
- Angela Lambkin
Higher Education Training Awards Council (HETAC)
- Seamus Puirseil, Des Carolan
NUI Cork (UCC)
- Dr Francis Douglas
National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)
- Eamonn Carey

Secretary to the Subgroup:
Damian McKeon, Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform

Acknowledgement is extended to the contribution of the following who participated in the work of the Certifying Bodies Subgroup since 2000:
Grainne Cullen, FETAC
Orla Lynch, FETAC
Miriam Broderick, HETAC
Renée Scully, HETAC

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Project Director
- Nóirín Hayes
Project Co-ordinator
- Maresa Duignan
Project Development Officer
- Paula Delaney
Conference Organiser
- Mairin Hyland

We also wish to acknowledge the contribution of Bridget Megarry and Fiona Healy.

■ **Membership of the OMNA Project Consultative Group**

Nóirín Hayes (Chair)	Dublin Institute of Technology
Michael Holohan	Dept of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
Joanie Barron	Wallaroo Playschool Ltd
Richard Byrne	Dept of Education and Science
Ger Neylon	Clarecare
Mary Bohan	Irish Vocational Education Association
Sylda Langford	Dept of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
Grainne Healy	National Women's Council of Ireland
Tilly Smith	FÁS
Orla Brady-O'Brien	AMI Montessori
Colette Murray	Pavee Point, Eíst Project
Mary Lee Stapleton	National Children's Nurseries Association
Catherine Fenton	Pre School Services
Chris Mulvey	Aontas
Deirbhile Nic Craith	INTO
Elizabeth Maloney	Liberties VEC
Tricia Hayes	Barnardos
Patricia Murray	Childminding Ireland
Maire Uí Ainín	An Comhchoiste Reamscolaíochta Teo
Dr Valerie Richardson	Dept of Social Science, UCD
Bernadette Burns	St Nicholas Montessori College
Anne Clinch	School of Practical Childcare
Des Carolan	HETAC
Dr Francis Douglas	Dept of Education, UCC
Maura Keating	ADM
Angela Lambkin	FETAC
Irene Gunning	IPPA The Early Childhood Organisation
Mary Beggan	FÁS
Eugene Wall	Mary Immaculate College of Education
Clare Healy	Waterpark Training
Eamonn Carey	NQAI
Frank Nugent	FÁS
Damian McKeon	Dept of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
Denise McCormilla	Border Counties Childcare Network
Una McCabe	The Froebel College
Pearse O'Shiel	Irish Steiner Kindergarten Association
Patricia Murphy	High Scope Ireland
Liz Dunphy	St Patrick's Drumcondra
Arlene Forster	Curriculum Development Unit, NCCA
Anne Garvey	Institute of Technology, Carlow
Heino Schonfeld	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
Janet Lucas	Consultant
Fiona Healy	Bright Horizons
Bridget Megarry	Consultant
Patricia O Cunneagain	Irish Youth Federation

■ Membership of the National Co-ordinating Childcare Committee

Sylda Langford, Chair	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
Pauline Moreau	Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform
Dora Hennessy	Department of Health and Children
Margaret Kelly	Department of Education and Science
Anne Tynan	Department of Social and Family Affairs
Esther Lynch	ICTU
Heidi Lougheed	IBEC
Colette Murray	Community and Voluntary Pillar
Mary McGreal	Irish Farmers' Association
Matt Loughnane	Border, Midlands and Western Regional Assembly
Tony Kelly	Southern and Eastern Regional AssemblyNational
Mary Beggan	FÁS
Seamus Mannion	Health Board Group
Hubert Kearns	Local Authorities - County and City Managers' Association
Hilary Kenny	IPPA, Early Childhood Organisation
Mary Lee Stapleton	National Children's Nurseries Association
Grainne Burke	Barnardos
Patricia Murray	Childminding Ireland
Maire Uí Ainín	An Comhchoiste Réamhscolaíochta Teo
Tracy Walsh	St Nicholas Montessori Teachers' Association
Pearse O'Shiel	Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Education Association
Orla O'Connor	National Women's Council of Ireland
Nóirín Hayes	Dublin Institute of Technology
Anne McGovern	County Childcare Committee Representative
Tony Crooks	ADM Ltd
Carmel Mulroy	Chambers of Commerce of Ireland
Monica Cassidy	PLANET
Siobhan Fitzpatrick	High Scope Ireland
Tara Smith	Community Groups - National Representatives' Network
Heino Schonfeld	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education

National Childcare Voluntary Organisations

Barnardos,
Christchurch Square, D8.
Tel: 01 453 0355

Childminding Ireland,
49 Applewood, Greystones,
Co. Wicklow.
Tel: 01 287 1111

IPPA the Early Childhood Organisation,
Unit 4 Broomhill Business Park,
Greenhills Road, Tallaght, D24
Tel: 01 463 0010

National Children's Nurseries Association,
12c Bluebell Business Park,
Old Naas Rd, D12.
Tel: 01 460 1138

An Comhchoiste Reamhscolaíochta Teo
7 Merrion Square, D.2.
Tel: 01 639 8442

Children in Hospital Ireland,
Coleraine House, Carmichael Centre,
North Brunswick House, D7.
Tel: 01 878 0448

Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children,
20 Molesworth Street, D2.
Tel: 01 679 4944

Irish Steiner Waldorf Early Education Association,
Tuamgraney, Co. Clare.
Tel: 061 927 257

St Nicholas Montessori Teachers' Association,
Callaghan's Lane, George's Place,
Dun Laoghaire.
Tel: 01 280 5705