

# Early Childhood

## How Aistear was developed: Consultation



### View the full Aistear document online



*Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in partnership with the early childhood sector in Ireland and abroad.



See *Towards a Framework for Early Learning: A Consultative Document* (2004) which the NCCA used to consult with practitioners, parents, researchers, those involved in training and education, and policy-makers on the development of the Framework.

Read the findings from the consultation in *Towards a Framework for Early Learning: Final Consultation Report* (2005). These findings informed the development of Aistear.

The NCCA then established the Early Childhood Committee to continue to support the development of the Framework. This committee included representatives from the early childhood sector and relevant agencies and government departments.



Take a look at *Aistear: Partnership in Action* for more information on how Aistear was developed in partnership with the early childhood sector. Formative assessment can support and extend early learning and development.



NCCA

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment  
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

# Towards a Framework for Early Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





# Foreword

The publication of *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* represents something of a milestone for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. While the NCCA has an established tradition of consultation with those who work in a wide range of educational settings, this is the first consultative document focused specifically on learning throughout early childhood from birth to six years. Supporting this learning is a new challenge for the NCCA, but working in partnership is an old and well-established practice. It is intended that this publication will serve as a basis for engagement with those who work in or have an interest in this sector of education as the NCCA moves towards the development of a national framework for early learning. Developing the framework in this way will ensure that it is built on shared understandings and rooted in a common commitment to children, their learning, and their future.

*Towards a Framework for Early Learning* is itself the product of consultation and collaboration with a wide range of agencies, organisations and individuals who brought multi-disciplinary experience and expertise to bear on the work. The members of the NCCA's working group on early childhood education played a central role in bringing the document to completion and a number of practitioners, academics and researchers who reviewed the document provided valuable feedback during its development. The ongoing support provided by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was, and continues to be, invaluable and greatly appreciated.

The NCCA team who worked on the development of this document deserve particular acknowledgement – Dr. Sarah FitzPatrick, Deputy Chief Executive, Cathal de Paor, Bairbre Boylan and Helen Guinan, Education Officers. The commitment of Arlene Forster, Director, Curriculum and Assessment, in leading the NCCA's work in early childhood education and in bringing this document to completion is greatly appreciated by those who work alongside her in NCCA.

The completion of the document is not an end, but the beginning of a new phase of the work of developing the framework, work in which all can share through participation in the consultative process mapped out in the concluding section.

**Dr. Anne Looney**  
Chief Executive

## Terms used in this executive summary

The consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* includes a glossary which explains a number of its terms. It is important that this glossary is consulted when reading this summary. In particular, the use of the terms 'adult' and 'practitioner' should be understood in the context in which they are used.



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Introduction\*

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum matters in early childhood education. In this role, it will soon begin developing a national framework for learning in early childhood. This refers to the period from birth to six years.

The title *Framework for Early Learning* is currently being used to refer to this framework. The framework is for adults who are responsible for children's learning and development in early childhood. It will support these adults in providing each child with learning opportunities which help him/her to learn to his/her full potential.

The consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* discusses the development of the framework. This executive summary gives an overview of the key ideas presented in the document. It is important to refer to the consultative document for detail on any of the points made.

### Structure of the executive summary

Like the consultative document, the summary has five sections:

- rationale and purpose
- the child as a learner
- contexts for learning
- supporting early learning through the assessment process
- building the framework.

### Consultation and partnership

There is a variety of curriculum guidance on early childhood in Ireland. Many organisations and networks have developed their own guidelines which are used in a range of settings. There are also curriculum developments at a national level, such as the Primary School Curriculum (1999) and Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice for the Early Start Preschool Intervention Project (1998).

The NCCA will work with the early childhood sector during the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*. This will help to ensure that the framework draws on the expertise in the sector, and reflects the diversity and richness of all curriculum work in this country. Details of how the NCCA will work in partnership with the sector are presented in the concluding remarks to this summary.







*The child is an active learner,  
making sense of his/her environment through  
the senses, movement and language.*

Rationale and  
\*purpose

## Introduction to section one

This section explains the importance of a framework to support learning across the whole early childhood period. It discusses the purpose of this framework, its intended audience, and some of its other central features.

## The national context

There have been many developments in policy for children and in legislation which support the development of the *Framework for Early Learning*.

These developments have increased the focus on children, and their rights and needs. In particular, the National Children's Strategy: Our Children—Their Lives (2000) presents a vision of children from birth, as individuals who should be supported and enabled to realise their potential. This vision is important in developing the Framework for Early Learning.

Another very significant development is the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2002. The NCCA has worked very closely with the centre in developing the consultative document. It will continue to do so in developing the framework.

### Recent relevant policy and legislative developments in Ireland

- 1991 - Childcare Act
- 1992 - UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- 1996 - Quality Targets in Services for Young Children
- 1998 - National Forum on Early Childhood Education
- 1998 - Strengthening Families for Life
- 1998 - Education Act
- 1999 - Best Health for Children – Developing a Partnership with Families
- 1999 - Ready to Learn, White Paper on Early Childhood Education
- 1999 - Primary School Curriculum
- 1999 - Children First- National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children
- 1999 - National Childcare Strategy Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare
- 2000 - National Children's Strategy, Our Children – Their Lives
- 2000 - Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
- 2002 - Investing in Parenthood to achieve best health for children: The Supporting Parents Strategy
- 2002 - Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector
- 2002 - Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
- 2003 - Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill

### The benefits of early learning

The benefits of early learning can be explained as follows:

- Early learning is the foundation for all later learning (the beginning of lifelong learning).
- Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for learning.

### The foundation of lifelong learning

From birth, children learn how to learn. They learn language and how to use it; they learn to think, to interact with others, and to be creative and adventurous. They also make decisions about their own abilities as learners and their own 'worth'. These different aspects of learning lay the basis for how children will learn in the future.

### A time of tremendous opportunity

Neuroscience shows that much learning occurs in the first six/seven years of life but especially in the first three years. It appears that there are certain times in these years when children benefit greatly from particular types of experiences, for example, rich language opportunities. This doesn't mean that children's learning should be rushed. With adult support, their learning should build on their strengths and address their needs. This will mean different levels and types of adult support for individual children, so that they are all helped to benefit from opportunities presented in early childhood.

### The Framework for Early Learning – vision and aims

#### Vision

The *Framework for Early Learning* promotes an early childhood for all children in Ireland where they can develop as learners within the context of trusting and loving relationships with others, and through meaningful engagement with their environment. They will be supported in their holistic development, and in realising their potential as learners in ways which reflect their individuality as well as their diverse experiences of childhood in Ireland in terms of their abilities, cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds.

#### Aims

Based on this vision, the *Framework for Early Learning* will aim to

1. support the development of all children from birth to six years as competent and confident learners within loving and nurturing relationships with adults and peers, recognising the diversity of ability, culture, language, faith, social group, and ethnicity which influences children's learning and development.
2. emphasise the important and influential role of parents/guardians as their children's primary educators during early childhood.
3. guide parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in planning and providing appropriate learning opportunities for all children, recognising

the range of their learning strengths and the areas of learning in which they require extra and/or specialised support.

4. support existing good practices in early learning. The framework will help practitioners to reflect upon and to evaluate their own practices, and in doing so to continue to strive to create and provide learning opportunities which have a positive, beneficial, and lasting influence on all children's learning.

## Features of the framework – some key questions answered

### Who is the framework for?

The *Framework for Early Learning* is for all adults responsible for children's learning and development from birth to six years of age.

This includes parents/guardians, childminders, and all practitioners working in out-of-home settings. These settings include family care (childminding), crèches, nurseries, parent-and-toddler groups, playschools, pre-schools, naíonraí, infant classes in mainstream and special schools, after-school, and hospital settings. These settings may operate within differing language contexts, for example, through Irish in the Gaeltacht, or through English in other parts of the country. The range of settings includes the private, public and voluntary sectors.

### What is the purpose of the framework?

The framework will support adults in providing all children with appropriately enriching, challenging, and enjoyable learning opportunities.

The framework will be based on the latest research and thinking about early learning. It will outline broad principles to guide adults in supporting children as they learn and develop. The framework will also describe the types of environments that best support this learning and development.

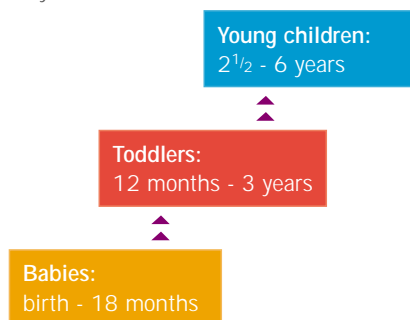
### How will the framework support each child's learning?

Children in Ireland have differing experiences of early childhood. The framework will guide adults in building on children's individual strengths while also meeting their individual needs. This should help to ensure that each child has positive and enjoyable experiences as a learner.

'Matching' learning experiences with children's individual learning abilities is important. The framework will show the similarities and the differences in how children learn, and in the opportunities and supports they need.

The NCCA suggests presenting learning in the framework in three overlapping phases:

- babies - birth to eighteen months
- toddlers - twelve months to three years
- young children - two and a half to six years.



This is a useful way of showing children's changing abilities during early childhood. It also highlights the importance of having different focuses in learning experiences which take account of children's new and emerging abilities and competencies, as well as new interests.

### How will the framework link with existing curriculum guidance?

A variety of curriculum guidance in supporting early learning is being used very successfully by many in the early childhood sector.

The framework will complement this guidance, and try to create more connections in learning throughout early childhood.

The framework will also help to show the importance of the everyday routines and practices parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners use with their children. It will help practitioners to look back on their own practices and interactions with children, and to identify where and how they can make improvements.

It is important that the *Framework for Early Learning* and the Primary School Curriculum (1999) have natural links, so that children experience continuity and progression in their learning throughout early childhood and as they move into the more formal stages of education.

### Why should a single framework be developed for the whole early childhood period?

A single framework has a number of advantages. It can

- show progress in learning from birth to six years. It can demonstrate that children need both care and education throughout this time.
- support all children to learn. It can provide parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners with suggestions for activities and interactions to enrich and extend each child's learning.
- support people in different professions who work with children, for example, people in education, health, speech and language, and occupational therapy. This should help to bring more continuity to children's learning.
- support early childhood as a time of wonder, joy, and discovery, nurturing keen and confident learners more successfully.
- highlight the importance of adult-child interactions (relationships) from birth.
- make more connections across the curriculum guidance already in use.





The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity and fairness has positive life-long implications.

The child\* as  
a learner



## Introduction to section two

This section focuses on the child as a young learner. In particular, it explores the child's many abilities and competencies in learning. It also identifies factors which can influence how, what, and when the child learns. The section concludes by presenting early learning through four connected themes: well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. The consultative document proposes that the *Framework for Early Learning* would be presented through these themes.

## Emerging key principles

- **The child is an active learner.**  
Children actively explore their environment. This exploration varies from child to child as it is shaped by the child's particular stage of development, his/her experiences in life, and his/her ability to learn. The child makes sense of the world through this exploration.
- **The child's learning is enhanced by warm and supportive attachments and relationships.**  
Children's relationships with their primary caregivers provide them with confidence and a feeling of security. This confidence and security encourage and motivate children to explore their environment, to interact with others, and to communicate what they think and understand about their world. In this way, trusting and loving relationships support early learning.
- **Each child is unique, developing and learning at different rates. Learning**

**based on the child's interests, strengths and life experiences is more interesting, relevant and fun for him/her.**

Children are born with their own unique abilities and capacities to learn. Every child should be helped to learn to the best of his/her ability. Learning experiences should be based on his/her interests, strengths, culture, language, and ethnic traditions. By focusing on the child as an individual, learning is made more meaningful, relevant and enjoyable.

- **Each child should develop a positive self-image and strong sense of self-esteem.**  
A positive self-image and a strong sense of self-esteem are important if children are to grow up secure, confident and happy. Each child should feel valued and respected for who he/she is. This provides great motivation for learning.
- **Encouraging learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity and fairness, can contribute positively to the child's future.**  
Developing positive learning dispositions can greatly enrich children's learning. Children can be more open to accepting new challenges in their learning, to working towards 'mastering' learning, and to persevering when faced with difficulty and/or uncertainty.
- **Children should have broad and balanced learning experiences.**  
Children should have a wide range of learning opportunities. Together, these experiences should support children's emotional, personal, physical, cognitive, linguistic, creative, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual development. Each learning experience will support many

of these aspects of learning at the one time. This shows the ‘connectedness’ of early learning.

## Holistic view of early learning and development

Given the ‘connectedness’ of learning, the consultative document proposes that the *Framework for Early Learning* will present learning through four broad and linked themes:

- well-being
- identity and belonging
- communication
- exploring and thinking.

Each of these themes is explained briefly below.

### Well-being

Well-being can be defined as being content and healthy. While this is important for all learning, it is especially so for early learning.

Well-being is encouraged within warm and supportive relationships with others. The child’s emotional well-being is related to the quality of his/her early attachments with adults. Warm and trusting relationships, where the child feels loved and where he/she is encouraged to express himself/herself, help the child to be positive about learning. This, in turn, helps him/her to become more independent, and able to cope with change and challenge. Physical well-being is also important for learning as this enables the child to explore, to investigate, and to physically challenge himself/herself in the environment. This exploration occurs through physical well-being, but it is also important for achieving physical well-being.

### Identity and belonging

Identity is about the characteristics, behaviours and understandings children have, both individually and shared with others. Belonging is about having a secure relationship with or connection to a particular group. It is important that children develop a healthy and positive sense of their own identity, and their place in society. Positive messages about their family, culture, faith, and language help them to feel valued and respected in society. Children, who come from a home where the language, culture and faith are not those of the wider society, should be supported in developing their identity and belonging within their own language, culture, and faith, as well as within the language, culture, and faith of the wider Irish society. For many children, the Irish language will be a significant part of their cultural inheritance and of their sense of identity. However, all children can be enabled to develop plurilingual identities at an early age.

Relationships with others also contribute to the child’s sense of identity and belonging. It is essential that each child is surrounded by messages of respect, love, praise, and encouragement. These messages should highlight for the child the importance of himself/herself as an individual rather than what he/she can/cannot do.

### Communication

Communication is about expressing and sharing thoughts, information and feelings. It helps children to indicate their needs, to build relationships with others, to explore their feelings, to create knowledge, and to represent and understand the world around them.

Children give and receive information in different ways. These different forms of communication generally reflect developmental stages during early childhood. While most children will eventually master oral language as their main form of communication, others may need to use a range of non-verbal means of communication, including pictures, symbols or gestures. Whatever form is suitable, all children should be supported and helped to communicate to the best of their ability from the earliest possible age. While children continue to develop their communicative abilities long after early childhood, this period is especially important. Play and the adult are central. Early experiences which support the development of children's communication skills are important for the development of literacy and numeracy (reading, writing, and mathematics). Children can also be supported in developing bilingually and benefiting from the advantages which bilingualism offers.

### **Exploring and thinking**

Exploring and thinking involve investigating and making sense of the world. Early childhood is a time of great opportunities for exploring, investigating, and interpreting these experiences to form ideas and theories about the world.

In exploring and thinking, children use their communication, physical, and sensory-motor skills. Trusting and loving relationships with adults provide the security for the child to explore and to find things out. In doing this, the child builds ideas about how things work and why things are the way they are. Interactions between the child and the adult, as well as interactions between peers, enrich and

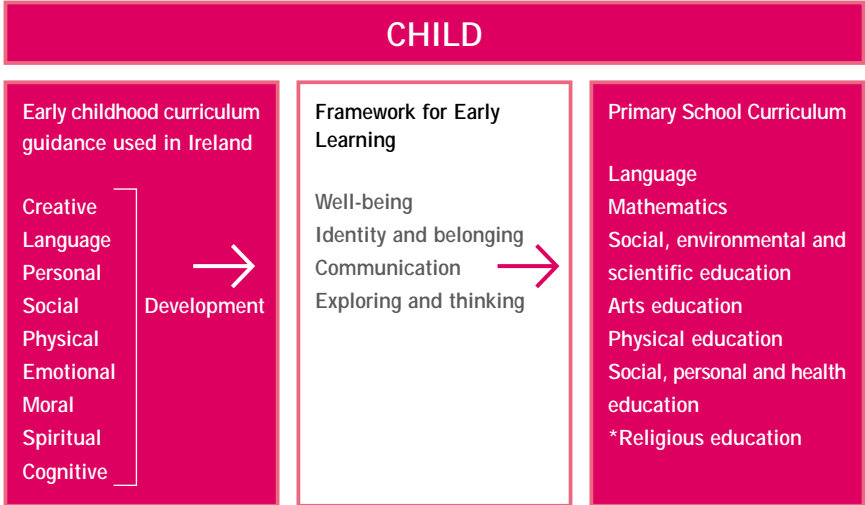
extend this exploring and thinking. Communication is a necessary part of these interactions as it allows ideas and thoughts to be created, shared and interpreted. Most children use language including oral, written, or signed, to achieve this.

The child's curiosity, as well as his/her ability to take risks in discoveries and adventures, provides the basis for being creative in exploring and thinking. Much of this occurs through play as children interpret their experiences and demonstrate their thinking with toys and other objects, including mark-making tools such as crayons. Play also supports the child's decision-making abilities. This is important in developing confidence and self-discipline.

### **Connections**

As outlined in section one, it is important to have connections between existing early childhood curriculum guidance, the *Framework for Early Learning* and the Primary School Curriculum (1999) so that there is progression in children's learning. The following graphic shows some of the connections between these different sources of guidance.

Connections across curriculum guidance



\*Religious education is the responsibility of the different church groups





*Play is a powerful  
context for learning.*

# Contexts for learning\*

## Introduction to section three

Learning is a continuous process, occurring in all the environments experienced by the child. Children learn through their senses, and through active engagement with the people, objects, events, and experiences in these environments. This section explores relationships and play as key contexts, and shows how they can support all children in their learning. Through this exploration, the section emphasises the importance of language as a tool for learning in both relationships and play.

The discussion in this section shows how learning through the four proposed themes for the framework—well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking—can be supported through relationships and play.

## Emerging key principles

### - **Children learn through actions and interactions with others.**

Early learning is a social process. Most children naturally enjoy contact with other people. This can be clearly seen in a newborn baby's efforts to communicate with his/her primary caregivers. Children's early learning is based on these first relationships which, with time, broaden to include their relationships with other adults and their peers.

Relationships based on respect, love, and care give children confidence to explore their environments. With help from adults, children interpret these explorations to create ideas and theories about how things work, why things happen the way they do, how people relate to each other, and so on.

### - **The adult is central in supporting children's learning through quality interactions.**

The adult-child relationship is critical in supporting and enhancing early learning. The adult enables each child to learn to the best of his/her ability, by considering his/her interests, experiences and strengths, and by meeting his/her needs. In this way, the adult gently and sensitively extends the child's learning by giving the help and the encouragement he/she needs to move on to the next stage of learning. The adult shares the responsibility for learning with the child – sometimes the child leads the learning, and sometimes the adult leads it.

Different children will require different types and amounts of help from the adult in their learning. The type and amount are based on the child's ability, strengths and needs as a learner. This ensures that each child is supported appropriately.

### - **Parents/guardians play a key role in supporting their children's early learning.**

Parents/guardians play a key role in laying the foundations for their children's learning. Much early learning is highly informal, occurring through the relationships and the conversations parents/guardians have with their children, and through the activities, routines, and tasks they share with their children. This supports and extends all learning, including language, for example, the child's acquisition of Irish in the case of Irish-speaking parents/guardians. Parents/guardians are also role models for their children, sending out powerful messages about

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how to behave towards others, how to care for oneself, and about what is important in life. In this way, parents/guardians support their children's learning in a way which is fun, appealing, and relevant to their children's lives.

- **Effective communication between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners enhances children's learning.**

Effective communication between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners can have a positive impact on children's learning. This communication helps childminders/practitioners to understand more fully how children learn, their strengths and needs and so on. Parents/guardians are also helped to understand what their children are learning and to support this at home. This sharing of information can help children's thinking, language, and social development in particular. This is most notable for children who are experiencing educational disadvantage where the provision for their learning is of a high quality.

In the case of children with special educational needs, parents/guardians often need to be supported by other specialists such as therapists. These specialists play an important role in helping parents/guardians to support and extend their children's learning at home. The early childhood practitioner is often the first to identify these special needs, and to assist parents/guardians in accessing the help they need.

- **Play is a powerful context for learning.** Children enjoy many different types of

play, including exploratory, construction, rough and tumble, role, and fantasy play, as well as games such as outdoor, card, and board games. This range of play is important in helping children to develop physically, to think and to create ideas, to imagine, to solve problems, to communicate, and to develop reading, writing, and mathematical skills, as well as to develop socially, morally, and spiritually.

While children learn much through unassisted play, learning is enriched and extended when the adult is involved. The adult fulfils many roles. As a 'player' with the child, he/she provides ideas and makes suggestions for the play, guides the child's learning through discussion, makes equipment and playthings available, and learns about the child by observing and listening. The adult uses these different strategies to ensure that each child is helped to learn to the best of his/her ability through play experiences.

- **Language is a major vehicle for learning.**

Most children will learn to use language as their main form of communication. Early childhood is an important time for learning this language. Children also learn through language. They use language to ask questions, to look for answers, to obtain information, to test their ideas, and to create new understandings. By listening to adults using language in varied and rich ways, by sharing in story times, learning rhymes, listening to songs and jingles, children broaden the range of words and phrases they use, and they use their language in new and different ways. This is also important in the



context of the child's plurilingual development.

- **The learning environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.**

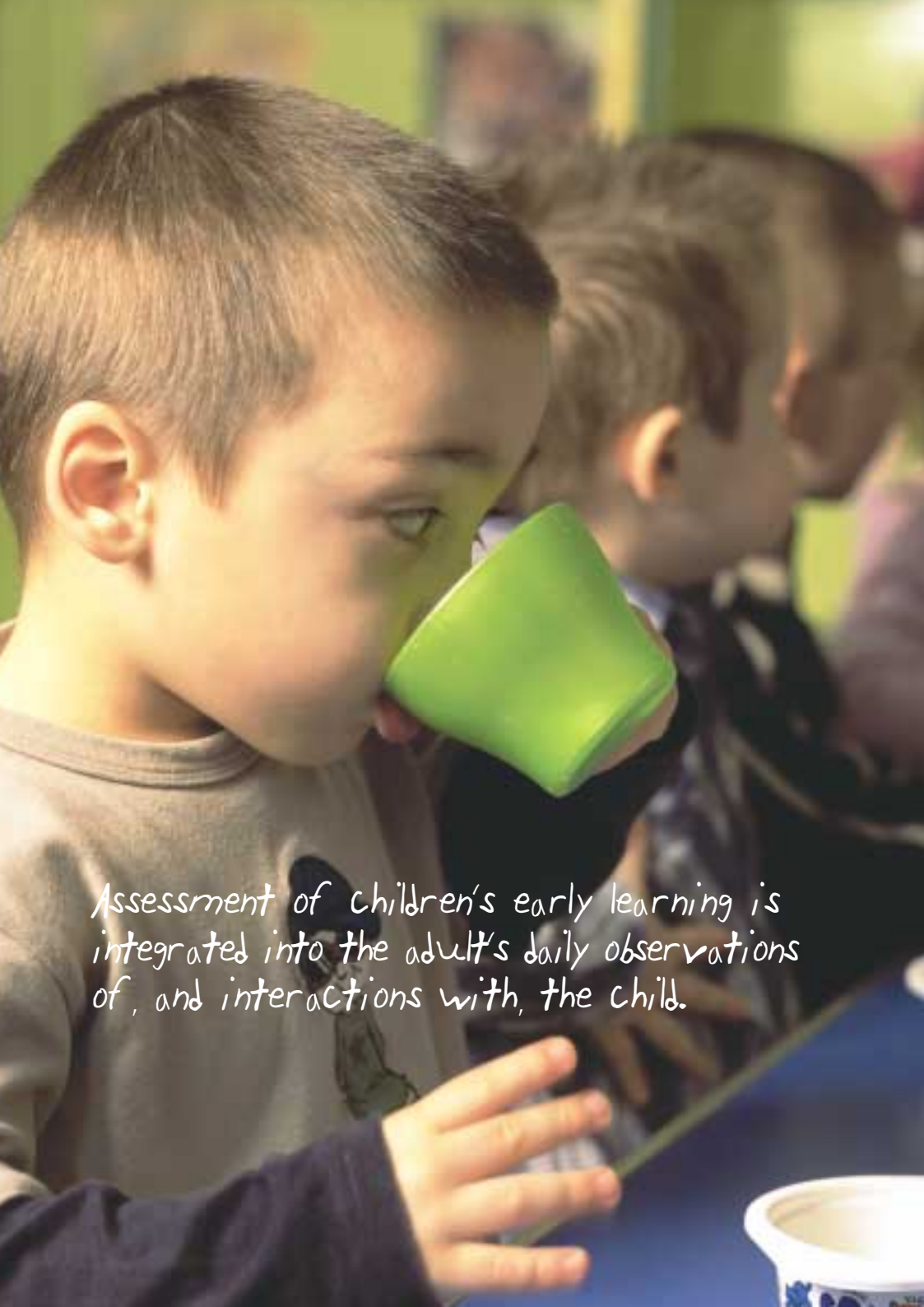
Children learn in both outdoor and indoor environments. These environments should be motivating and inviting, and reflect children's changing developmental needs as well as the specific needs some may have. For example, a child who is blind or partially sighted will benefit from large equipment and playthings with strong sensory features, as well as the assurance that certain playthings are to be consistently found in the same areas of the environment. The environments should also reflect the diversity of children's identities through their playthings, music, language, stories and games. This should support each child to develop his/her sense of identity and belonging which is critical for success in learning.

It is important that the environments encourage children to interact with adults and where possible, other children. Environments which support children's learning through relationships and also through play make early learning appealing, relevant and fun. This does not happen naturally. The adult needs to plan, organise, resource, and evaluate the environment regularly so that each child's learning is supported in the best way possible.

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*learning is enriched and extended  
when the adult is involved*



*Assessment of children's early learning is integrated into the adult's daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.*

\* Supporting early learning through the assessment process

## Introduction to section four

This section highlights the important role of assessment in early learning. Assessment helps the adult to recognise and celebrate progress, and to plan for and support the child's learning in the most appropriate manner. The consultative document suggests that assessment should be a natural part of adult-child interactions. More formal ways of assessing are used where there is a concern about the particular needs of a child, and to monitor progress as children near the end of early childhood. The early identification of special educational needs, in all their diversity, is particularly crucial here.

It is important that information about the child's social, cultural, linguistic, and physical environment is considered when interpreting assessments. The child himself/herself should play an active part in making assessments about his/her learning, as should parents/guardians who have detailed information and knowledge about their child.

## Emerging key principles

- **Assessment of children's early learning is informal and a natural part of the adult's daily observations of, and interactions with the child.**

The assessment process should help practitioners to observe children's learning, understand it more clearly, and use that understanding to support future learning. Carefully observing the child, talking meaningfully and sharing in his/her learning, provide the adult with information which he/she can use to improve day-to-day interactions with the child. A narrative ('story') approach

to assessment is particularly helpful. This can include the practitioner and the child keeping a diary, portfolio, or 'learning story' together, and supplementing written notes with pictures, and audio/video recordings. Assessments are usually made over time and in a range of learning situations. The practitioner's experience and training help him/her in structuring and deciding what information should be recorded. This recorded information is used to provide the child with appropriate learning experiences. It also helps the practitioner to share information with parents/guardians, and other professionals.

- **Assessment celebrates the child's progress and achievements, and helps the adult to plan for enhanced learning, by building on the child's strengths and meeting his/her needs.**

It is important that each child's progress is celebrated. Assessment helps the adult to identify this progress, and plan for the next steps in learning ensuring that this learning is meaningful to the young learner, and appropriate to his/her needs. Information on the child's current strengths, needs, and interests enable the adult to gently challenge and support the child as necessary.

- **Assessment facilitates the early identification of children with special educational needs, and helps in planning for the necessary resources and appropriate approaches to support learning.**

Adults have a responsibility to identify children whose learning is, or will be, affected negatively for any number of reasons. Where adults have concerns

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about children experiencing potential difficulties in their learning, diagnostic assessments and screening tools are useful. Early detection is an important part of the process in order to refer children to specialists where necessary. Where there is such a concern, diagnostic assessments need to be carried out by specialists in early intervention.

- **Children should be actively involved in assessing their own learning and setting their own goals, helping them to become confident, capable, lifelong learners.**

The ability to think critically, to apply and adapt knowledge to new situations and to be creative in problem-solving is essential for children in today's world of change. The adult gently draws out the child's ideas about activities and concepts, and encourages him/her to play an increasingly active part in setting and pursuing his/her own achievable learning goals. Self-assessment can often give insights into aspects of learning missed by the adult, and seen as important by the child. It can also provide the adult with information on what the child finds difficult. Very importantly, self-assessment can help the child in learning how to learn, which in turn builds his/her confidence as a learner.

- **Parents/guardians have valuable insights and information about their child which are important in creating a whole picture of the child's development.**

When children attend settings outside the home, parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners have a joint role to play in the assessment process. Open, two-way relationships between

parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners support the sharing of information about the child's progress and development. Parents'/guardians' information greatly enhances the childminder's/practitioner's picture of the child as a learner, and vice versa.

- **Reflective practice and assessment go hand-in-hand, and together benefit all the partners in the learning process.**

Ongoing assessment of children's learning helps the practitioner to identify areas of practice that could benefit from attention. Through analysis and discussion, practitioners as a group can identify areas where practice needs to be improved as well as recognising areas of strength. They can also identify how this improvement can take place. These areas can be used as the focus for further raising the quality of provision for children's learning.







The play environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.

\*Building the  
\*framework



## Introduction to section five

This section proposes a model for the *Framework for Early Learning*. It is hoped that this model will help to focus people's thoughts on some possibilities for presenting the framework. The final design of the framework will be decided through consultation with the early childhood sector, and through follow-on work directed by the NCCA.

## Influences on a national framework

Many factors influence the types of early learning experiences children have. The choices we make about these experiences reflect what we as a nation consider important for children to learn, and how, when, and where we think they should learn. The *Framework for Early Learning* will be based on the beliefs and values we have as a society regarding children, and their learning during early childhood.

## The Framework for Early Learning – proposed components

It is suggested that the framework should

- present the **vision** of children as early learners upon which it is based
  - articulate its **philosophical and value base** and its **aims**
  - present the **principles** which underpin how children's early learning should be supported in a manner which respects how they learn, and the importance of that learning
  - outline **learning through the four themes** discussed in section two (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking)
- present a set of **aims** within each of the four themes
  - present **learning goals** within each aim
  - identify and describe a range of **learning experiences** that could be used to achieve these goals, taking account of children's different abilities, cultures, languages, faiths, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds
  - include **exemplars** (or case studies) of good practices in supporting early learning, which reflect the diversity of Irish early childhood care and education (for example, diversity of setting, age of child, philosophy, and pedagogical approach)
  - outline **interaction styles/strategies** for parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in supporting early learning
  - promote the importance of **partnerships between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners** in supporting children's learning and/or where children are supported by other **professionals including therapists**
  - advise how parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners can support each other in using **assessment** for the benefit of individual children
  - promote **reflective practice** (by practitioners) which empowers the adult in his/her role as educator, but also as learner

- provide practical advice on **planning** (by the practitioner) for early learning so that children's strengths as well as their needs shape the experiences they are offered.

### The proposed model for the framework

The consultative document outlines the proposed model for the *Framework for Early Learning* in some detail. It presents learning using the four themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. Each theme has a set of aims. Each aim in turn is sub-divided into learning goals. Suggestions for learning experiences to assist the child in working towards these goals are also given. Some exemplars of good practices are included to demonstrate more clearly how the adult can support the individual child to learn. It is important to refer to the document for this detail. In considering the proposed model, it is essential to remember that it is a suggested model.

### Conclusion

The model outlined is a **sample** model. It gives ideas about how the framework might be structured and presented. It is important that the early childhood sector shares its thoughts on this model with the NCCA. On reaching a decision as to how best to present the framework, we can then move forward in developing it.

The conclusion to this summary presents plans for a consultation process. The NCCA will use this process to meet with the early childhood sector to discuss the proposals outlined here.





*All aspects of early learning are interconnected: children should experience a broad and balanced range of learning experiences where all dimensions of development are interwoven.*

\* Looking ahead

## Consultation and partnership

The development of the *Framework for Early Learning* is an important opportunity to build a shared understanding of how all children from birth to six years can be supported appropriately in their learning. During this, the NCCA will work with

- parents/guardians
- childminders
- practitioners
- relevant government departments
- other professionals in early childhood care and education, and related disciplines.

An extensive consultation process is planned from March to August 2004 following the launch of the consultative document. There are a number of strands in this process. These are outlined below.

### 1. The consultative document: *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*

The NCCA developed the consultative document based on extensive research of curriculum guidance, in Ireland and internationally. It also drew on its past experiences of developing the Primary School Curriculum (1999) which contains an infant curriculum based on principles of early learning. The NCCA worked closely with the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE), and the Early Childhood Technical Working Group during the development of the document. In this way, the document provides a sound base for the NCCA to work in partnership with the early childhood sector in developing a framework which is informed by research, and which reflects good practices.

The NCCA plans to consult with the early childhood sector using

- **response forms**, which will be available at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie) and in hard copy
- **regional seminars** organised and hosted by the NCCA
- **sectoral briefings**, on request, for early childhood organisations and networks
- **written submissions** from organisations and networks
- **portraits** of a small number of early childhood settings.

### 2. Invitational seminar

The NCCA will convene an invitational seminar during autumn 2004, where a report on the findings of the consultation process will be launched. The report will also present a revised plan for the framework in light of the findings. The seminar may provide opportunities to learn from early childhood experts on issues central to the development of the framework.

### 3. Early Childhood Committee

The NCCA has established an Early Childhood Committee, whose membership is representative of the early childhood sector. This committee will support the NCCA in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.

Through these different strategies the NCCA will develop the framework in partnership with those who support children in their early learning.

## Work plan

The following table sets out the timeframe for the consultation process.

Timeline for the consultation process	
Date	Action
March 2004	Launch the consultative document <i>Towards a Framework for Early Learning</i>
March – August 2004	Consult with the early childhood sector (response forms, regional seminars ...)
Autumn 2004	Invitational seminar – report on the findings from the consultation, and present revised plan for the framework

## Conclusion

The last decade has seen significant developments in policy for children as well as substantial financial investment in support of early childhood. There is a growing awareness of the importance of the quality of children's early experiences, both for their lives as children, and as adults. The development of the *Framework for Early Learning* represents an opportunity to promote this importance, and in doing so, to enrich all children's lives as learners.

The early childhood sector has a central role to play in developing the framework. Through consultation and partnership, a framework can emerge which can meaningfully support parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in extending and enriching each child's learning. Through your involvement in the consultation, the *Framework for Early Learning* can reflect the richness of good practices in the sector. In this way, a national framework can be developed which will make a positive and lasting contribution to all children's lives as young learners.



## Photographs

The NCCA would like to thank all those who kindly consented to having their photographs taken and used in this document. The NCCA was granted parental/guardian permission in the case of the children in the photographs. This was considered necessary and appropriate with children in the age group from birth to six years.







**NCCA**

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment  
An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta

# Towards a Framework for Early Learning

A CONSULTATIVE DOCUMENT



# \*Foreword

The publication of Towards a Framework for Early Learning represents something of a milestone for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. While the NCCA has an established tradition of consultation with those who work in a wide range of educational settings, this is the first consultative document focused specifically on learning throughout early childhood from birth to six years. Supporting this learning is a new challenge for the NCCA, but working in partnership is an old and well-established practice. It is intended that this publication will serve as a basis for engagement with those who work in or have an interest in this sector of education as the NCCA moves towards the development of a national framework for early learning. Developing the framework in this way will ensure that it is built on shared understandings and rooted in a common commitment to children, their learning, and their future.

Towards a Framework for Early Learning is itself the product of consultation and collaboration with a wide range of agencies, organisations and individuals who brought multi-disciplinary experience and expertise to bear on the work. The members of the NCCA's working group on early childhood education played a central role in bringing the document to completion and a number of practitioners, academics and researchers who reviewed the document provided valuable feedback during its development. The ongoing support provided by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) was, and continues to be, invaluable and greatly appreciated.

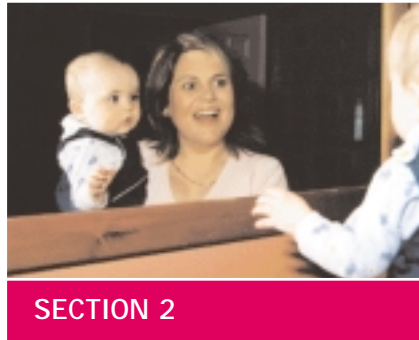
The NCCA team who worked on the development of this document deserve particular acknowledgement – Dr. Sarah FitzPatrick, Deputy Chief Executive, Cathal de Paor, Bairbre Boylan and Helen Guinan, Education Officers. The commitment of Arlene Forster, Director, Curriculum and Assessment, in leading the NCCA's work in early childhood education and in bringing this document to completion is greatly appreciated by those who work alongside her in NCCA.

The completion of the document is not an end, but the beginning of a new phase of the work of developing the framework, work in which all can share through participation in the consultative process mapped out in the concluding section.

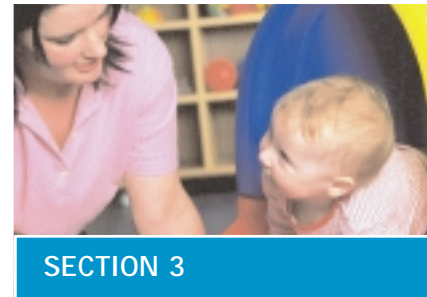
Dr. Anne Looney  
Chief Executive



SECTION 1



SECTION 2



SECTION 3



SECTION 4



SECTION 5

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**Adults**

Adults play a fundamental role in children’s early learning. Parents/guardians are the primary caregivers and educators. Other significant adults in children’s lives include extended family, childminders, early childhood practitioners, and other professionals, such as therapists and social workers. In this consultative document, the term adult is used inclusively to refer to all of these persons.

**Assessment**

This refers to the practices of observing and reflecting upon children’s learning in order to support and extend this learning appropriately.

**Attachment**

This is the emotional relationship between a child and a particular caregiver, which provides a ‘secure base’ for the child’s nurturance and engagement with his/her environment, including other people.

**Child development**

Child development can be viewed under the following headings: physical development, intellectual development, language and communication development, creative development, emotional development, social development, moral development, and spiritual development.

**Childminder**

A childminder provides a loving and caring home environment to the child in which his/her learning is supported.

**Communication**

Communication enables children to express and share their thoughts and feelings and needs with others, to establish and maintain social relationships, to represent, categorise and understand the world around them, and to develop knowledge about their culture and society. This document presents a broad understanding of communication, embracing non-verbal,

verbal and symbolic communication. Communication is one of four themes proposed for the Framework for Early Learning.

**Competence**

This refers to the knowledge and skills that a child possesses.

**Culture**

Aspects of culture include language, religion, traditions, education, hygiene, food, diet and eating habits, music, song, drama, literature and art, leisure activities, and style of dress.

**Curriculum**

This refers to all learning experiences, whether formal or informal, planned or unplanned, which contribute to a child’s development.

**Developmentally appropriate**

Activities are developmentally appropriate when they reflect a child’s particular age and stage of development.

**Developmental domain**

Areas or domains of development including cognitive (including language), physical, creative, spiritual, personal, social, moral and emotional.

**Early childhood**

Internationally, early childhood tends to refer to the period from birth to between six and eight years of age. In this document, and for the purposes of developing a framework for early learning in Ireland, it is appropriate to use six years as the upper age limit, given that it marks the beginning of compulsory schooling.

**Early childhood setting**

This is the setting or environment in which children learn and develop. These settings can be very diverse, and can be within or outside the home. Settings outside the home can include a neighbour’s or childminder’s home, a nursery, crèche, naíonra, playschool, pre-school, infant classroom in mainstream or special school,

after-school club, and hospital. They also include similar-type settings in the Gaeltacht. All these settings provide children with opportunities to learn during early childhood.

**Emergent literacy**

This recognises the importance of early language experiences in supporting literacy development among children. Activities involving play, talk and discussion can support the emergence of literacy in a natural and enjoyable way. These experiences provide an important base for later literacy.

**Ethnicity**

Members of a particular ethnic group may share a particular culture, language, or a way of life.

**Exploring and thinking**

This is a theme proposed for the Framework for Early Learning. It refers to active exploration of all aspects of the environment in which children may engage. This exploration enables children to interpret their environment by using their intelligence to think in convergent and divergent ways.

**Framework for Early Learning**

This refers to the framework which will be developed by the NCCA in partnership with the early childhood sector. It will guide and support learning throughout early childhood, from birth to six years inclusively.

**Identity and belonging**

This is a theme proposed for the framework. Identity refers to the identifying characteristics, behaviours and understandings which children may have, sometimes uniquely, and sometimes shared with others. Shared identities enable children to develop a sense of belonging or a close relationship with or affinity to a particular group.

**Individual education plan**

This is a plan which uses the information gleaned from the assessment process, to identify the short-term and medium-term

learning targets related to the child’s special educational needs, and the learning activities designed to respond to those needs.

**Language**

Language embraces oral, written, and manual communication, and consists of content (semantics - vocabulary and word meaning), form/syntax (grammar - sounds and sentence structure), and use (social use of language).

**Learning**

Learning can be formal or informal: formal learning consists of learning experiences which have been planned for the child, while informal learning occurs randomly on a continuous basis as the child interacts with the environment.

**Learning disposition**

Learning dispositions have been defined as ‘habits of the mind’ (Katz, 1987). They refer to how a child approaches and engages in learning. Some common learning dispositions in early childhood include confidence, courage, perseverance, playfulness, resilience, responsibility, and trust. Having skills in a certain area is quite different to having a disposition for that area: for example, having reading skills is quite different from having a disposition to read.

**Learning environment**

This is the setting in which learning takes place. It includes both outdoor and indoor environments.

**Maturation**

The sequential emergence of physical and mental characteristics, governed by instructions contained in the child’s genetic code and shared by all members of the human species.

**Numeracy**

Developing an understanding of mathematical numbers and concepts.

**Parent/guardian**

In this document the term parent/guardian refers to the child’s primary caregivers and educators.

These include the father and mother and/or guardians of the child.

**Phonological awareness**

Phonological awareness is the awareness that words can be broken down into constituent sounds. It includes the ability to hear sounds in words in the correct sequence and to segment, count, blend and manipulate them.

**Physical skills**

As physical development proceeds, the child acquires various physical skills which require co-ordination between sensory input, brain organisation and motor output. These skills often require a great deal of practice before becoming automatic. Gross motor skills use the large muscles in the body and include walking, running, and kicking a ball. Fine motor skills are used in activities such as pointing, using a knife and fork, and writing.

**Play agenda**

Each player has a personal play agenda reflecting his/her interests and intentions.

**Practitioner**

All those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings. Practitioners may have a diversity of experience and qualifications ranging from unaccredited through to post-graduate level.

**Reciprocity**

This involves turn-taking routines during communicative exchanges between the adult and the child at pre-verbal, verbal and symbolic levels. These exchanges are characterised by mutual interest, enjoyment and communicative intent.

**Reflective practice**

Reflecting critically on their practices, and asking questions of themselves (possibly with the help of others), helps practitioners to optimise their own learning as well as that of the children with whom they work.

**Scaffolding**

This is a metaphor used to describe the process whereby adults support and guide children’s learning, enabling the children to ‘perform’ at a level beyond their own capabilities.

**Sensitive periods**

This refers to a period of time when a specific aspect of a child’s development would benefit from the presence of appropriate stimulation or experiences.

**Social skills**

These refer to the ability to be with others, while knowing the appropriate behaviour for particular situations and activities. This behaviour includes the ability to meet, mix and communicate with others; knowing how to share, take turns and accept rules.

**Socialisation**

This is the process by which children learn the standards, values, and expected behaviours of their culture and society.

**Special educational needs**

The Report of the Special Education Review Committee (SERC) defines children with special educational needs as including

those whose disabilities and/or circumstances prevent or hinder them from benefiting adequately from the education which is normally provided for pupils of the same age, or for whom the education which is generally provided in the classroom is not sufficiently challenging.

(1993, p.18)

**Well-being**

This is a theme proposed for the framework. It refers to all aspects of the physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual health and well-being of the child, which are essential foundations for early and all subsequent learning.

**Zone of proximal development**

This refers to what the child could do, know and understand with input from a more knowledgeable and skilful person.





# \* Introduction

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) will soon begin the development of a framework to support children's learning throughout the early childhood period from birth to six years. The title, Framework for Early Learning is currently being used to refer to this framework. The framework is intended for adults in all early childhood settings who have responsibility for nurturing children's learning and development. It will support these adults in giving children learning opportunities responsive to their individual strengths and needs, and so help them to realise their full potential as learners.

## Remit of the NCCA

The NCCA's work in developing a framework for early childhood learning has its legislative basis in the Education Act (1998). The Act states that the NCCA advises the Minister for Education and Science on matters relating to

(b) the curriculum for early childhood education, primary and post-primary schools.

(Education Act, 1998, Article 41-1)

This consultative document, Towards a Framework for Early Learning is an important stepping stone in the development of the framework. It is primarily a consultative tool, which the NCCA will use to work in partnership with the early childhood sector in designing the Framework for Early Learning and in planning for its development.

## Structure and purpose of the current document

The document comprises five sections:

- rationale and purpose
- the child as a learner
- contexts for learning
- supporting early learning through the assessment process
- building the framework.

As a starting point, the document articulates a clear vision of all children as capable young learners from birth, with rights to be supported and guided in realising their full potential. This includes children of all abilities, cultures, languages, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds. This vision is an important foundation in furthering the development of the framework.

The document continues by presenting a rationale for the development of a national framework for early learning. It identifies and explores key ideas that are central to such a framework. In discussing these ideas, it draws attention to many significant principles which inform us how early learning should be supported. These principles emerge through the discussions in the document, and are summarised in the conclusions to the various sections. The document closes with an outline of what the Framework for Early Learning might contain, illustrating how it could assist adults in supporting all children in their learning.

This outline is for consideration and comment by the early childhood sector.

## Consultation and partnership

A variety of curriculum guidance for early childhood already exists in Ireland and there is a need to reflect the diversity and richness of this in the framework. Many organisations, in drawing on a range of experience and expertise, have developed their own guidance which is used in a range of settings. There are also curriculum developments at a national level. The Primary School Curriculum (1999a), developed by the NCCA, guides the learning of children enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (children aged 4+) through Irish and English. Building on the experiences of the Rutland Street Project, the Department of Education and Science developed Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice for the Early Start Preschool Intervention Project (1998) (children aged 3+). The NCCA will consult widely with the early childhood sector to ensure that the Framework for Early Learning draws and builds on this work.

The development of the framework is a significant milestone in curriculum development in Ireland. The NCCA has a long and established tradition of partnership in its work. Consultation is the cornerstone of this partnership and will enable all those in the early childhood sector to work together in contributing to the development process. Developing the framework in this way provides opportunities to create a unified vision of what constitutes quality in terms of supporting and nurturing early learning for all children in this country, and to reflect this in daily practice.

The NCCA will consult with the early childhood sector both prior to and during the development of the framework. Details of this consultation and partnership are presented in the concluding remarks to this document. It is critical that the sector takes the time to read and to reflect on the central ideas presented in this document, and to respond to the NCCA on these. A response form accompanies the document and is also available at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie). Focus questions are interspersed through this document to guide the reader's thinking in the case of each of the nine ideas outlined on the response form. Through analysing the responses, the NCCA can draw on the current curriculum work and expertise in the sector, and better ensure that the Framework for Early Learning is a relevant and valuable document for everyone responsible for children from birth to six years.





\*The child is an active learner, making sense of his/her environment through the senses, movement and language.

\*Rationale  
and purpose



- 1.1 Introduction to section one
- 1.2 The national context
- 1.3 The benefits of early learning
- 1.4 The Framework for Early Learning - vision and aims
- 1.5 Features of the framework
- 1.6 Conclusion

### 1.1 Introduction to section one

This section presents the rationale for the development of the Framework for Early Learning to support learning across the whole early childhood period. It begins by outlining the national context for such an initiative, and proceeds to explore the benefits of early learning. It concludes with a brief discussion of some of the framework's central features.

### 1.2 The national context

Early childhood is a time when children learn through caring and nurturing relationships. Side by side with this, there is an understanding of children as a community of intuitive young learners with both care and educational needs, and rights.

Care and education are inextricably linked elements in a child's holistic development – this reality must be reflected in the ethos and programme of all services.

(Expert Working Group on Childcare, 1999, p.50)

The development of the Framework for Early Learning is timely. Recent policy developments illustrate an emerging endorsement of children's rights to both care and education:

Children are recognised as individuals within a family and in the wider community with rights to equal support, care and promotion of their wellbeing. (desired outcome of recommendations)

(Commission on the Family, 1998, p.229)

Some of the policy and legislative developments in the area of early childhood care and education are summarised in Box 1.1.

#### Box 1.1: Recent relevant policy and legislative developments in Ireland

- 1991 - Childcare Act
- 1992 - UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
- 1996 - Quality Targets in Services for Young Children
- 1998 - National Forum on Early Childhood Education  
- Strengthening Families for Life  
- Education Act
- 1999 - Best Health for Children – Developing a Partnership with Families  
- Ready to Learn, White Paper on Early Childhood Education  
- Primary School Curriculum  
- Children First – National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children  
- National Childcare Strategy, Report of the Partnership 2000 Expert Working Group on Childcare
- 2000 - National Children's Strategy, Our Children – Their Lives  
- Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme
- 2002 - Investing in Parenthood to achieve best health for children:  
The Supporting Parents Strategy  
- Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector  
- Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
- 2003 - Education for Persons with Disabilities Bill

The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992 was a significant turning point in Ireland's history of supporting children in early childhood. In signing, Ireland accepted a range of international obligations concerning the welfare of children seven of which pertain to the area of their rights to care and education in their formative years.

This was followed by the publication of a Ten-Year Action Programme, Quality Targets in Services for Young Children by the European Commission Network on Childcare (1996) which states that a quality early years programme may only be achieved within a national policy framework. While we now have such a framework, the National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives (2000) we have no national policy for learning in the early years, a factor noted repeatedly at the National Forum on Early Childhood Education convened in 1998. Concentrating on early learning, this forum paved the way for Ready to Learn, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999b). This paper recommends the development of guidelines to support children's learning throughout early childhood. In addition, the need to support parents/guardians in catering for their children's learning is emphasised. This key message also underpins the more recent Investing in Parenthood to achieve best health for children: The Supporting Parents Strategy (2002).

1999 also saw the launch of the Primary School Curriculum, the outcome of extensive collaboration and partnership between the education partners. This curriculum, which contains an infant curriculum for children aged four to six years, is based on the latest thinking and research about how children learn, and how that learning can be supported optimally for each child through skilled, sensitive, and informed involvement by a teacher.

The curriculum recognises the integrity of the child's life as a child and aims to cater for his or her needs and potential as they evolve day by day. By meeting these needs, the curriculum enriches the child's life and the foundations are laid for happiness and fulfilment in later education and in adult life.

(Primary School Curriculum, Introduction, p.6)

The National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives was launched in 2000 by the National Children's Office. The Strategy presents a vision of the place and rights of children from birth:

An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and

supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential.

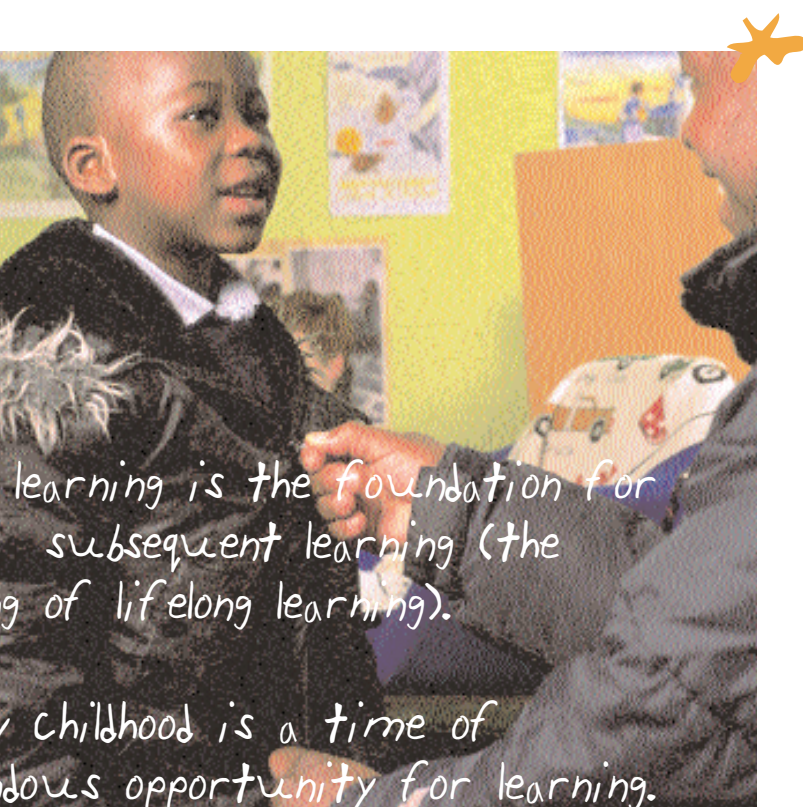
(National Children's Strategy, 2000, p.4)

This vision emphasises the importance of enabling children to experience a fulfilling childhood and to realise their potential. By implication, it highlights the responsibility of adults to support children in achieving this. This strategy, and in particular its vision, is very timely for the development of the Framework for Early Learning.

2000 also saw the commencement of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) under the auspices of the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. This programme aims to enable parents/guardians to avail of training, education, and employment opportunities through the provision of quality childcare supports. This programme provides funding to facilitate both the expansion of the early childhood sector, and the improvement of the quality of services for children.

The recent development of the Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector (2002) is also significant. This framework presents guidance on the professional development of those working in the early childhood sector. This is especially relevant to the NCCA's work, given the centrality of the adult-child relationship in supporting and extending early learning.

Another important initiative has been the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2002, under the auspices of the Department of Education and Science. The centre has responsibility for the overall co-ordination and development of early childhood education in Ireland, giving rise to areas of mutual interest with the NCCA. A close working relationship between the two organisations is thus important in the development of the Framework for Early Learning. The NCCA has worked in close partnership with the CECDE in developing the current consultative document and will continue to do so.



These policy developments provide a strong value base for the development of the Framework for Early Learning. Collectively, they see all children as young people with an innate dignity, and an entitlement to appropriate support in their learning and development from birth. Such support should assist them in realising their true potential irrespective of the range and/or capacity of that potential.

Policy developments in other areas will also influence children's lives in Irish society for example, in the areas of health and community affairs and so also provide a context for the development of the framework. In relation to language, the development of the framework takes place in the context of Irish and English being official languages of the state. The last decade has seen other important developments in relation to the language profile of the country. These developments relate to languages including Ulster Scots, Irish Sign Language, Irish Traveller Cant, and languages brought to the country by newcomers such as refugees, asylum seekers and other persons.

All policy developments to a greater or lesser extent help create the context for the work undertaken by those involved in the early childhood community. This community is quite diverse comprising the private, public and voluntary sectors. These sectors support, complement and extend the work of parents/guardians with their children. Local groups and networks play a key role in responding to local needs in early childhood care and education.

### 1.3 The benefits of early learning

Early childhood research continues to highlight the extent and nature of learning from birth, and the possibilities for development which this learning offers. Learning actually begins before birth, but this is beyond the scope of the framework. Research is also exploring the relationship between early learning and subsequent learning into adulthood.

As with learning in later life, early learning can be both formal and informal. For example, the child who learns how to tie his/her shoelaces will very likely have been taught to some degree by someone. On the other hand, much of his/her other learning will be incidental and unplanned, such as learning how to greet people, or that night is associated with darkness and day with light. When the child begins school, informal learning will continue to be a part of his/her learning experiences, although the balance between the two may change.

The benefits of early learning, and the reason why learning should be supported in an informed and purposeful way at this stage in a child's life, can be explained as follows:

- Early learning is the foundation for all subsequent learning (the beginning of lifelong learning).
- Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for learning.

#### The foundation of lifelong learning

The period from birth to six years is understood as being a time of life qualitatively different from later childhood and adulthood. It is a time of tremendous growth and development when the young mind, body, and spirit experience change at an unprecedented rate.

Early childhood is... a period of momentous significance for all people... By the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers, and as language users, and they will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their own worth.

(Donaldson, Grieve and Pratt, 1983, p.1)

Donaldson et al. pinpoint the very centrality of early learning to life itself. It is the foundation to learning for life and learning throughout life. Early experiences shape us as learners. By the end of our early childhood years we have reached important conclusions about our own abilities, our own achievements and the expectations others have of us as learners. In this way, early experiences contribute significantly to later well-being, and influence the quality of a person's life. These experiences should nurture all areas of learning and development appropriately, and should promote a child's image of himself/herself as a capable and competent learner in a positive way.

The recognition of the importance of early learning and its link with the future is stated again and again in a range of guidance issued for, and by practitioners in Ireland.

#### A time of tremendous opportunity

Neuroscience is revealing that learning is profound in the first six/seven years of life but especially in the first three years. The development and learning that occur in these three years are crucial for laying the foundations for competence and coping skills that will affect children's overall capacity to learn and to behave, and their ability to manage emotions (The Supporting Parents Strategy, 2002). During this time, the brain is particularly receptive to appropriate stimulation and nurturing:

Experiences may alter the behaviour of an adult, but experience literally forms the mind of a young child.

(Winkly, 1999)

We also know that there are so-called sensitive periods, during which children can benefit enormously from particular types of experiences. For example, Sproule, Murray, Spratt, Rafferty, Trew, Sheehy and McGuinness (2001) write that while the sensitive periods for early language learning may vary for individual children, they are always over by the age of four or younger. This is relevant for the development of a child's first language, as well as his/her bilingual development, for example, an English-speaking child learning Irish in a naíonra or other setting. During this time, children may also begin to learn other languages and develop their own plurilingual identity. At the same time, however,





others suggest that language may have several sensitive periods extending into adulthood, strengthening the idea of lifelong learning (Blakemore and Frith, 2000).

While neuroscience may yield much information about early learning in the future, it is known that the early learning environment is pivotal in providing children with the appropriate stimulation and challenge to nurture all aspects of their learning. At the most basic level, good nutrition and nurturing are essential for optimal brain development (McCain and Mustard, 1999). The child also needs to interact with an environment which supports optimum early physical, cognitive, language and social development, as well as the development of emotions and an understanding of one's own ability and worth. Central to all this are high quality adult-child interactions.

Early childhood is not a time for solely maximising children's learning for the sake of their future. While the young brain is very ready for experiences which can have a positive impact on subsequent learning, this does not mean that learning has to be unduly accelerated or rushed. We should not impose knowledge and skills more appropriate to later learning on these young and highly sensitive minds. Children are vulnerable to the absence of appropriate early stimulation, but are equally sensitive to the presence of inappropriate learning experiences. Attempts to accelerate learning beyond their developmental capacities may actually inhibit learning and damage their self-esteem and confidence as learners, possibly undoing much of the potential good of early experiences (Elkind and Sigel, 1987). Premature formality in early learning is also considered unwise (Keating, Fabian, Joran, Mavers and Roberts, 2000; Marcon, 1999; Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). Similarly, it is stated in the Norwegian Framework Plan for Kindergartens (children aged 1-6 years).

...childhood as a life-phase has a high intrinsic value, and children's own free-time, own culture and play are fundamentally important...the need for control and management must at all times be weighed against the children's need to be children on their own premises and based on their own interests.

(OECD, 1999b, p.21)

Early learning through discovery and adventure will promote mastery, understanding and achievement in a fun way. This learning should arise from children's own interests and experiences, and take account of their specific strengths and needs. It must also take place within the context of the child's culture and language(s).

However, not all children learn at the same rate. Many need support such as that offered by early intervention, to avail of the opportunities which early childhood offers. This is especially important for vulnerable children such as those who have a disability, or who are disadvantaged in other ways such as by socio-economic background and/or ethnicity. Some children may also be unwell, and need special support.

#### 1.4 The Framework for Early Learning – vision and aims

##### The vision

The Framework for Early Learning promotes an early childhood for all children in Ireland where they can develop as learners within the context of trusting and loving relationships with others, and through meaningful engagement with their environment. They will be supported in their holistic development, and in realising their potential as learners in ways which reflect their individuality as well as their diverse experiences of childhood in Ireland in terms of their abilities, cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds.

##### FOCUS QUESTIONS

Do you share this vision for the Framework for Early Learning?

What change(s), if any, would you make to it?

##### The aims

Premised on this vision, the Framework for Early Learning will have a number of aims. The framework will

1. support the development of all children from birth to six years as competent and confident learners within loving and nurturing relationships with adults and peers,

recognising the diversity of ability, culture, language, faith, social group, and ethnicity which influences children's learning and development.

2. emphasise the important and influential role of parents/guardians as their children's primary educators during early childhood.
3. guide parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in planning and providing appropriate learning opportunities for all children, recognising the range of their learning strengths and the areas of learning in which they require extra and/or specialised support.
4. support existing good practices in early learning. The framework will help practitioners to reflect upon and to evaluate their own practices, and in doing so to continue to strive to create and provide learning opportunities which have a positive, beneficial, and lasting influence on all children's learning.

It is hoped that these aims reflect the many and varied experiences of childhood lived by children in Ireland at this time. The aims emphasise the importance of the relationships between children and adults, and in particular the centrality of parent/guardian-child interactions. With this importance come responsibilities. Children need experiences which help them to realise their potential in all areas of learning and development, irrespective of individual difference in potential. An important process in facilitating this is reflective practice. Here, adults have a responsibility to reflect critically on their own practices in an effort to continually improve the quality of the learning opportunities they create for children. This relentless search for quality can enrich the lives of both the children and the adults who work with them.

##### FOCUS QUESTIONS

Do you think these aims are appropriate for a national framework?

Are there additional aims which you believe should be included?

### 1.5 Features of the framework

#### What is the purpose of the Framework for Early Learning?

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

In its review of early childhood care and education in twelve countries, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2001a) noted the value of a national framework in helping practitioners to focus on and to clarify the aims of their work with children. In particular, it noted the role of the framework in highlighting progression in children's learning, and in providing a structure to ensure that all areas of learning are guided, supported and nurtured.

If a national framework is to be helpful in this way, it must have certain characteristics.

- It should be underpinned by a set of principles which relate to the nature of early childhood and in particular early learning.
- It should be inclusive, reflecting the varied strengths and needs of early learners and providing support and guidance to parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in relation to these varied strengths and needs.
- It should reflect what we as a society consider important in terms of nurturance and support during the initial years of life.
- It should reflect and complement current good practices in the range of early childhood settings. In this way, the framework can reflect the rich diversity of philosophies, traditions, and approaches in early childhood care and education.

To have these characteristics, the Framework for Early Learning will be informed by the latest research and thinking about early learning. Drawing on this, it will articulate broad pedagogical principles to guide adults in supporting children as they learn and develop. The framework will also present the key areas of development and learning through themes.

Expressed through aims, goals and learning experiences, these themes will set out the dispositions, skills, attitudes and knowledge children should learn. The framework will also describe in broad terms, the types of environments that best support early learning and development. In this way, adults will be assisted in tailoring learning to the individual child so that he/she has a positive, enjoyable and motivating experience as a young learner. Section five presents a more detailed discussion of the proposed model for the framework.

#### Who is the framework for?

The Framework for Early Learning will address learning across the whole early childhood period. In this way, the framework will be relevant to all those responsible for the development and learning of children from birth to six years of age. This includes parents/guardians, childminders and all practitioners in the various disciplines working in the range of settings outside the home. These settings include crèches, nurseries, parent-and-toddler groups, playschools, pre-schools, naíonraí, infant classes in mainstream and special schools, after-school clubs, and hospital settings. They also include similar settings in the Gaeltacht. This range of settings encompasses the private, public and voluntary sectors.

#### How can one framework cater for the diversity that exists?

The vision for the Framework for Early Learning captures the importance of all children being supported appropriately in their learning. While children have many similarities in how they learn and what they learn, they also present many differences in terms of the learning opportunities and the supports they need.

These differences emerge from diversity in stage of development, ability, learning dispositions, and diversity in social, cultural, language and ethnic backgrounds. The Framework for Early Learning, in realising its vision, will need to provide sufficient guidance to enable adults to respond to children's individual strengths and needs in planning for and providing them with a positive and enjoyable start in life. Differentiation of learning experiences must therefore be a central tenet of the framework.

Children demonstrate significant changes in their developmental abilities during early childhood.

For example, they usually learn to sit, walk, and talk, to make connections in their thinking, to represent their thoughts symbolically, and to become more and more responsible for areas of self-care. It is important that they have opportunities to build on and to develop these changing abilities. In order to cater for this level of diversity, it is suggested that the framework will be presented in three overlapping phases for babies, toddlers, and young children (Figure 1.1):

- Babies – birth to eighteen months
- Toddlers – twelve months to three years
- Young children – two and a half to six years.

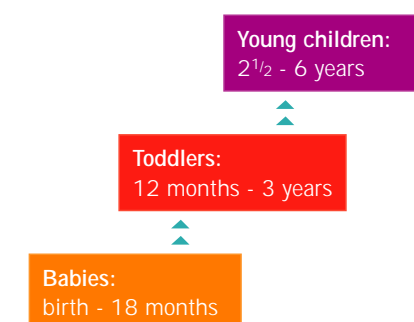


Figure 1.1: Three overlapping phases

This approach may be an over-simplification in some respects. For example, behaviour typical of babies does not cease to exist when the baby reaches eighteen months. In addition, the learning experienced by a two and a half-year old is significantly different from that of a six-year old. Nonetheless, the age groupings can be a useful way of capturing the changing abilities throughout early childhood. They also make it possible to show the importance of having different focuses in learning experiences which take account of children's new and emerging abilities and interests.

#### How will the framework interface with existing curriculum guidance?

As outlined in the introduction to this document, a variety of curriculum guidance to support early learning already exists in Ireland and is being used very successfully by many practitioners. This guidance reflects the diversity of practice, a hallmark of early childhood care and education in Ireland.



It is important that the framework reflects this diversity including

- setting/learning environment
- philosophy
- length of day (i.e., whether sessional or full-day)
- age of the children
- language
- culture.

As a national framework, the Framework for Early Learning will complement existing curriculum guidance and try to create more coherence and connectedness across learning throughout early childhood. It will offer advice and guidance to adults in planning and providing appropriate learning experiences for the individual child. However, the specifics of these experiences will



need to be decided locally between the adult and the child. This endorses the personal nature of learning and the child's role in partnership with the adult in shaping and directing that learning. It acknowledges the intimate knowledge the adult has of the child as a learner – how he/she learns, his/her learning needs, interests, and strengths. It also ensures the preservation of the different philosophical approaches, traditions, and structures characteristic of early childhood practices and settings in this country.

The Framework for Early Learning will have both implicit and explicit links with the Primary School Curriculum (1999a). Sharing many of the principles of early learning, which emerge through this document, this curriculum is used to guide and shape the learning experiences of most children from five years onwards. As such, it is essential that the framework and the Primary School Curriculum collectively ensure continuity and progression in children's learning. The NCCA has begun a rolling monitoring and review of the Primary School Curriculum, with the chief aim being to gather information on teachers' and children's experiences of its implementation, with a view to informing future developments. This will include a focus on the infant curriculum, and should yield rich insights into children's initial experiences in the early classes. In this way, the development of the framework and the ongoing review of the Primary School Curriculum can be mutually beneficial.

#### **Why is a single framework being proposed?**

Recent years have seen an emerging trend of developing frameworks which overarch the whole of early childhood, a practice endorsed by the OECD (2001a). Such an approach would have a number of advantages in the Irish context.

- A single framework, which traverses age boundaries, can reflect the continuum of early learning more successfully by promoting the care and educational needs of children from birth to six years. This will help to give the earliest learning the recognition and status it deserves. In the past, the needs of children from birth to three have tended to be understood from a care perspective, while education was seen more as the priority for those from three onwards. This may have resulted in fragmentation and an undervaluing of early learning.
- A single framework is more conducive to planning for, and supporting children's learning along a continuum of ability. For children whose development is impaired or delayed through disability and/or disadvantage, an overarching framework can provide parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners with appropriate starting points which reflect the relevant developmental stage.
- A single framework can reflect the diversity of children's lives in Ireland in terms of culture, language and socio-economic background.
- An overarching framework can be used to inform practices across a range of settings and disciplines or professions. This will promote multi-disciplinary practices through greater communication and sharing of understandings between practitioners from different professional communities, for example, education, health, speech and language, occupational therapy.
- Early childhood can be a time of wonder, joy, and discovery. It is these experiences that produce keen and confident learners and which should be encouraged and promoted in a national framework. This can be achieved more effectively if learning is considered across the whole of early childhood. Thus the development of one framework should help to address early learning in a more coherent and inclusive manner. It should also help to promote the importance of the everyday activities and tasks children share with adults.
- A single framework can highlight the importance of adult-child interactions (relationships) as a central focus for quality learning experiences throughout childhood. These relationships are an important context for early learning as outlined in section three of this document.
- Much guidance in supporting early learning is already currently in use in this country. It is envisaged that the Framework for Early Learning will create more coherence across this guidance. The framework will help to affirm and support parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in their everyday routines and practices. It will also encourage reflective practice as a tool for improving the quality of provision for children's learning.

#### **1.6 Conclusion**

Early childhood is a time of incredible learning. This learning has a fundamental impact on all later learning and on the individual's life itself and should therefore be supported and encouraged appropriately. One step to achieving this is through the development of a national framework. Ireland has a strong policy base for such an initiative. This together with the experience, expertise, commitment and participation of the early childhood sector in partnership with the NCCA creates an ideal opportunity to develop a framework which will support adults in helping all children to learn to their full potential.

#### **FOCUS QUESTIONS**

Do you agree with the idea of a national framework for learning in early childhood?

Do you think this framework might be of help to you in your setting?



\* The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity and fairness has positive life-long implications.

The child  
as a learner

- 2.1 Introduction to section two
- 2.2 Early learning and development
- 2.3 Holistic view of early learning and development
- 2.4 Aspects of early learning and development
- 2.5 A thematic framework
- 2.6 Connections across curriculum guidance
- 2.7 Conclusion

## 2.1 Introduction to section two

This section provides an overview of the child as a young learner, focusing on the capacities and competencies he/she brings to the learning process. It explores the many influences on the child's learning. In particular, it notes the importance of early learning opportunities which are responsive to the individual needs of each child.

The section presents early learning in the context of four interconnected themes: well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. For each of these themes, the section refers to the learning and development of babies, toddlers, and young children.

## 2.2 Early learning and development

### The global view of the young learner

From the moment of birth—and indeed before—most children display a tremendous capacity and desire to learn (Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 1999). Forming early secure attachments with significant caregivers facilitates exploration of the environment and thus assists learning. The innate drive to learn is evident in children's desire to become aware of and to understand their world, and everything in it. It is reflected in their need to feel wanted and loved, which are important foundations of healthy and positive early learning experiences. It is also displayed in the child's curiosity and wonder about his/her environment, in the excitement he/she feels in engaging with that environment, and in achieving and developing growing independence.

At birth, the learning environment consists of the key adult(s) who care(s) for the young baby. Later, the physical environment becomes more relevant, and the child begins to engage with more adults and peers. Occurring in a playful context, these interactions can support much learning which is self-initiated, fun, positive, and motivating with appropriate support or involvement from others.

This image of the active learner presents learning and development as a dynamic process, which can vary in any given situation according to the level of self-direction by the child, and support from others. This support should take full account of how the child naturally interacts with and develops an understanding of his/her environment, as well as the child's individual abilities and capacity for learning.

### The uniqueness of each child

There are many different experiences of early childhood in Ireland today. Each child's 'path of learning' is shaped by individual potential and the range of experiences he/she has in everyday life (Hayes, 1999). This diversity results in different experiences of early childhood. These different experiences in turn determine the level and type of adult support needed by individual children in nurturing and extending their learning and development.

Children are born with a unique repertoire of abilities and strengths, which should be supported and nurtured appropriately. Some children have significant learning disabilities and need particular help in learning. Individual personality traits, health, additional sensory or physical needs, behavioural difficulties, and individual life experiences also need to be considered.

Children develop and learn within particular social, cultural, and language environments. Irish society has undergone unprecedented social and economic change in recent years. Some of the greatest changes have occurred in terms of family structures and the composition of Irish society. A growing percentage of children in early childhood are now growing up in diverse family arrangements.

Poverty continues to affect significant numbers of children. This poverty can significantly impact on parents'/guardians' means to support and to foster early learning appropriately. Unable to exploit these early opportunities, these children can face many difficulties in later learning.

Recent years have brought increased cultural and linguistic diversity to Ireland. It is vital that children from these communities, as well as children whose native language is Irish or English, develop a healthy sense of identity and belonging in this new cultural context.

An additional factor influencing the type of early childhood experienced by children in this country is the increasing number of children spending time in out-of-home settings. Many people are also living increasing distances from their extended families. Therefore some children are spending an increasing percentage of their first few years of life in the company of adults other than their parents/guardians, grandparents or extended family.

Differing experiences of childhood necessitate different types and levels of adult support in nurturing early learning and development. The nature and intensity of this support should always be dependent on the strengths and needs of the individual child. Matching opportunities to children helps to ensure that they are all supported in realising their own potential, and in working towards becoming independent, participating, and responsible citizens.

As suggested in section one, the Framework for Early Learning will reflect the many and diverse experiences children have of early childhood. Through information and advice, it will guide those working with children to plan for and to provide the types of learning environments and supports children should have to realise their potential, and to give them a positive, enjoyable and motivating start in life.

### FOCUS QUESTIONS

Does this image of the child as a learner convey the role played by most children in their early learning?

Do you think this image reflects the diversity of children's experiences of childhood in Ireland?

## 2.3 Holistic view of early learning and development

All aspects of early learning are interconnected. At no other stage in life is this more obvious and more relevant. While it is possible to identify different dimensions to this learning, for example, social, emotional, personal, physical (sensory and motor development), cognitive, linguistic, creative, aesthetic, moral and spiritual, these are intricately interwoven, influencing each other in highly complex and sophisticated ways.

Adopting a holistic view of the child as a learner in the Framework for Early Learning is important for many reasons. Firstly, it foregrounds the child's own capacities and strengths as a learner. This focus sees our youngest children as contributing citizens with entitlements to opportunities and supports for their learning and development, as expressed in the National Children's Strategy (2000).

Secondly, the holistic approach emphasises the interconnectedness of all learning. Naturally, different experiences will nurture learning and development in some dimensions more than in others. For example, conversations and story-time will be of most relevance in linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional development. However, focusing on the whole child as a learner rather than on discrete areas of development reflects more accurately the complexity and multi-faceted nature of early learning.

Thirdly, the holistic view better facilitates the identification and organisation of all the supports children should have to help them to realize their full learning potential. All children need nourishment, secure, happy and trusting relationships, and appropriate access to health and education services. These services need to be supplemented for some children. For example, a young baby with a physical disability may need access to physiotherapy and/or occupational therapy. The structure and intensity of these additional services can vary with time, and their provision in a holistic context ensures that the child receives broad and balanced learning experiences while having his/her specific needs met appropriately. This holistic approach also places the child in the context of his/her family.

## 2.4 Aspects of early learning and development

The National Children's Strategy: Our Children - Their Lives (2000) highlights the importance of a variety of experiences to give each child opportunities to learn and develop in all areas.

The Framework for Early Learning will support and nurture all aspects of early learning and development in a way which reflects the interconnectedness and integration of learning. A review of national and international frameworks shows that there are two typical approaches to presenting such a framework:

- domains of development
- learning themes.

### Domains of development

In this type of approach, early learning is presented in a series of domains of development. The domains commonly used include cognitive (including language) development, physical development, and personal, social and emotional development. Some countries have adopted this approach, for example, the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework (2001) presents learning using the titles 'the thinking and communicating self, the physical self, and the psychosocial self.'

These principal domains of learning are generally further sub-divided into a greater number of categories for later phases in early childhood, for example, for children aged three to six years. In reflecting international practice, the Primary School Curriculum (1999a) presents the learning for children aged 4-6 years in the form of broad curriculum areas:

- Language
- Mathematics
- Social, environmental and scientific education
- Arts education
- Physical education
- Social, personal and health education\*

\*Religious education is the responsibility of the different church groups.

The Primary School Curriculum recommends that learning is presented to children of this age in a highly integrated manner through the use of topics and themes. The use of a subject-oriented strategy to present learning as the curriculum

does is quite typical at the upper stages of early childhood, to coincide with formal schooling. Similar domains are used by many early childhood organisations in Ireland in their curriculum guidance. The focus of the Primary School Curriculum is the critical role played by the adult in supporting and guiding children's learning across all the curriculum areas.

### Learning themes

An alternative approach to presenting learning is the use of a cross-curricular or thematic model. One of the most celebrated examples of this is the New Zealand curriculum framework Te Whariki (1996) for children from birth to school age (typically five/six years of age). This presents early learning using five interlocking strands or themes. These comprise

- Well-being
- Belonging
- Contribution
- Communication
- Exploration.

This approach is also used in the curriculum framework, Quality in Diversity, which was developed by the Early Childhood Education Forum (1998) in England. Here, the foundations for early learning are

- Belonging and Connecting
- Being and Becoming
- Contributing and Participating
- Being active and Expressing
- Thinking, Imagining and Understanding.

The thematic approach conveys successfully the integrated and holistic development of the young learner, and the totality of his/her learning needs. This approach has much to offer the design of the Framework for Early Learning, and is explored in detail below, and later in section five.

## 2.5 A thematic framework

This consultative document proposes that the Framework for Early Learning will present learning through four broad and complementary themes:

- Well-being
- Identity and belonging
- Communication
- Exploring and thinking.

Each theme embodies particular areas of learning and development. In outlining learning through each of the four themes, the following sub-sections draw attention to the full spectrum of children's abilities. Children follow different developmental pathways with some children having developmental disabilities and/or delays. These children may learn at different rates and achieve different levels of understanding. This means that no two children will benefit fully from the same learning opportunities in the same sequence, at the same rate, and with the same level and type of adult support. These differences are critical in providing each learner with experiences and opportunities reflective of his/her uniqueness as a learner. The Framework for Early Learning will celebrate and support this diversity.

### Theme: Well-being

Well-being can be defined as the condition of being content, healthy, and well adapted to the environment. A child's well-being is an essential foundation for early learning, and all subsequent learning. It is nurtured within the context of warm and supportive relationships with others, and relates to many different aspects of development such as physical, emotional, intellectual, moral, and spiritual.

Early childhood is a time of tremendous physical growth and change for all children:

The passage from the limited motor repertoire of the newborn to the complex loco-motor and manipulatory skills of the toddler stands among the most visible and dramatic transformations in the human life-cycle.

(Thelen, Kelso and Fogel, 1987, p.39)

Initially, babies will attend to sensations. Many will then begin to respond to these with movement, and this movement will, in the case of most children, later develop from being reflexive to being increasingly complex and purposeful. During this time, children also develop an intense consciousness of what they can do. This physical development has been explained in terms of maturation, which takes place within the context of a challenging and supportive environment. This environment is provided through relationships with responsive and caring adults, who also satisfy basic needs

such as healthcare, for example immunisations and sanitation. An appropriate environment also necessitates appropriate nutrition, which apart from being essential for physical well-being, impacts on other aspects of the child's life such as behavioural development as discussed by Wachs (2000). The needs of children who are unwell must also be considered. These children's ability to concentrate can be affected by ongoing pain and discomfort, the effects of medication, the need for sleep periods, the effects of travel, and intensive therapy sessions.

As emphasised in the National Children's Strategy (2000), physical well-being is closely related to other domains such as cognitive and emotional. For example, through movement, children's physical abilities can contribute significantly to developing their thinking processes. It also provides them with an alternative expressive medium. In discussing physical development for pre-school children, Project Early Years Education (Project E.Y.E., 2000) emphasises the value of physical activity for healthy living and for all-round development:

Whatever its effect, there is obviously a need for children to engage in strenuous physical activity in enjoyable and purposeful ways. The most striking purpose is that through movement a child identifies an important means of self-discovery. Movement also offers opportunities for developing language and imagination as well as the more social skills of discipline, co-operation and awareness of each other...

(Project E.Y.E., Educator's Handbook, p. 8)

Children's physical exploration of their environment also helps them become more confident and self-assured, thereby supporting the development of their sense of self, self-esteem and self-confidence. There is tremendous variety in children's physical size and appearance. This can impact on their interactions with others (Bee, 1992). It is important that children are affirmed and receive positive messages about their physical presentation throughout early childhood, so that they are content with their physical presence and so that they experience fulfilment in their changing abilities and competencies. This contributes positively to their self-image and self-worth.





Intellectual well-being can be promoted in an environment where consistent support enables them to make sense of their

The child's emotional well-being is directly related to the quality of early attachments. According to Bowlby (1979), attachment provides the baby with a sense of security, and encourages communication and the expression of feelings. The quality of the first attachment prepares the ground for all later relationships. Warm and trusting relationships, where children feel loved and where they are encouraged to express themselves fully, enables the child to develop emotions such as enthusiasm, interest and a positive disposition to learn. This helps the child to become more independent, so that as he/she grows and develops, he/she can adapt to change, and demonstrate resilience and resourcefulness. Some children will need intensive support in this interaction in order to help them engage with their environment. However, all children can work towards a level of independence which reflects their specific abilities, strengths, and interests. Given that disabled children may encounter many challenges in life, positive thinking, encouragement and support on the part of those who work with these children as they develop a sense of self is crucial. Children's sense of well-being is also dependent on the acceptance of their culture. It is important that they see their culture as being respected and valued.

A sense of well-being encourages the child to actively explore and challenge himself/herself as appropriate in the environment. Playful interaction with the environment in a way that is sufficiently challenging to match cognitive capacities is essential for intellectual well-being. It is also important to ensure that the child benefits from sufficient rest periods.

Another aspect of health is the child's spiritual and moral well-being. The National Children's Strategy identifies this well-being as including 'feelings, experiences and beliefs that stimulate self-awareness, wonder, reverence, moral and aesthetic sensibility, and questions about the meaning and nature of life and death' (2000, p. 27). Early learning experiences should nurture this dimension of well-being. For many children development and learning in this area will be based on religious beliefs and practices in particular faiths.

### Babies

It is within the context of the baby's early attachment(s) that his/her emotional and physical well-being is promoted. Apart from basic healthcare and nutrition, babies benefit from having opportunities to engage in various activities involving both gross and fine motor skills. These include lifting their heads up, sitting up, reaching, grasping, standing up, and walking. This should occur in a safe and supportive environment in which the babies gain a sense of satisfaction from their efforts. Most can be encouraged to develop a certain level of independence, such as holding their own bottle/cup when drinking, while some will continue being very dependent on adult support for their early physical well-being.

Babies' intellectual well-being can be promoted in an environment where consistent routines enable them to make sense of their experience. For example, they begin to understand cause and effect when they throw toys in order to make a noise. They show preferences for focusing on people's faces. They follow moving objects, and begin to recognise familiar voices. They also begin to react to their own name being called and they begin to repeat actions which make other people laugh.

### Toddlers

Toddlers' early relationships continue to provide the context for their developing sense of well-being. Feelings of frustration can often emerge in these relationships as toddlers learn to reconcile their own need for autonomy and their need to stay close to their caregivers and to feel protected by them.

In terms of physical development, most toddlers will develop an increasing awareness of their own bodies and their abilities, as well as their limitations. They show great enthusiasm for being active. They may express themselves with the aid of specific equipment such as slides, swings, balls, tricycles, and bean-bags, as well as responding to particular stimuli such as music, or in the context of a game. This can also stimulate learning in the creative and expressive dimensions.

Other toddlers will have special needs, which require sensitive support from adults. For example, visual cues (rather than audio) could be

used with a deaf child in eliciting appropriate responses within a game. For some toddlers, activities for promoting physical well-being will involve attending to stimuli, and learning from the accompanying sensations.

Toddlers' emotional well-being is fostered by having opportunities to be independent, and by being encouraged to express themselves. Most will show an increasing ability to concentrate, and to make their own choices. However, some will need special support in carrying out routines, and in overcoming challenges. Their curiosity and sense of wonder, which is an important part of spiritual development, can be fostered in simple ways through observing and experiencing the natural world such as rainbows, new-born animals, sand and water.

### Young children

The range of physical activity which young children may use becomes increasingly diverse. Physical activity such as climbing, swinging, balancing, cycling, rolling, and running not only develops gross motor skills, but also extends the children's sense of bodily and spatial awareness, enabling them to explore the world from new and different perspectives. Different children will need to be supported in their physical activity in different ways.

Physical activity also relates to the mastery of simple tasks and routines, such as toileting, washing, dressing and feeding. Young children can be encouraged to become responsible for their own well-being and for these particular routines/tasks. They can also be encouraged to become more responsible for their own actions, for example, tidying up their own toys/books. Such responsibility enhances their self-esteem and sense of independence.

Young children's emotional well-being is promoted by enabling them to express a range of emotions, so that they can identify both their own emotional responses and those of others. This is an important part in the development of the ability to empathise, as they develop an increasing sense of responsibility for their own well-being and for that of others.

Young children's intellectual well-being is promoted through opportunities to use and extend their developing intellectual competencies. Young children will enjoy activities such as sorting, matching and ordering. They will also derive satisfaction from activities such as constructing, making marks, solving problems and puzzles, predicting, making connections, and developing an awareness of print.

### Theme: Identity and belonging

Identity is a complex combination of characteristics, traits, and behaviours. These contribute to a child's uniqueness, as well as to their sense of belonging or affinity with particular groups in society in terms of culture, ethnicity, language, gender and social group. Identity is dynamic, and will develop during the child's life. Aspects of identity can also change in their significance for the child throughout his/her life.

The National Children's Strategy (2000) highlights the importance of children developing a healthy and positive sense of their own identity and their place in society. Positive messages about children's family, their beliefs and traditions, and their culture and language help children to develop a confidence about their worth and the worth of their communities in society.

The young child's sense of identity and belonging is bound up with his/her relationships with others. In their interactions, children develop an awareness of themselves as human beings distinct from others. Self-image and self-esteem are shaped by the worth the child attaches to himself/herself. It is therefore important that messages of respect, love, praise and encouragement are communicated to children. Such messages should highlight to the child the importance of himself/herself as an individual rather than what he/she can do. In this way, the adult(s) with whom children engage and interact

play an important and responsible role in the development of a positive sense of identity and belonging. As Griffin writes:

From the moment of birth we are all engaged in a process of becoming 'ourselves'. It no doubt takes a lifetime to complete the picture. However, those early foundations laid by our primary caregivers (and those caregivers they trust to continue the work) are crucial to the picture we paint of ourselves.

(1997, p.43)

These foundations have their roots in the initial relationships a child develops with his/her primary caregiver(s). The quality of these relationships establishes a pattern that influences the child's subsequent development.

The child's identity is also dependent on the role he/she plays within particular groups and on the sense of belonging which emerges from this. In early childhood these groups will include the primary caregivers, the immediate family, the extended family, friends, childminders and practitioners. Active participation in these groups creates and affirms a sense of belonging. This participation is important in developing much pro-social and moral behaviour, including the ability to empathise, to understand others' perspectives, to turn-take, to share, and to follow social rules and conventions. This sense of belonging reinforces self-esteem.

A child's sense of identity and belonging is intricately connected to his/her immediate culture and that of the wider society. Cultural identity is developed by reference to how people live, experience and give meaning to their lives. It finds expression in language, music, dance, games, and in the shared histories and beliefs of people. Aspects of this diversity will have different significance for different children.

Ireland's native cultural inheritance will be very significant for many children. This includes the Irish language, which is available to many children growing up in Irish-speaking homes in the Gaeltacht and elsewhere from their parents and grandparents. There is also a rich tradition associated with English in the country. Children's identities as citizens of the European Union, as well as the increasing cultural diversity and globalisation in Irish society means that children's plurilingual identities will become more and more important. All of this enriches the cultural and linguistic experiences available to children. It is also important that all children are enabled and encouraged to appreciate and celebrate this diversity.

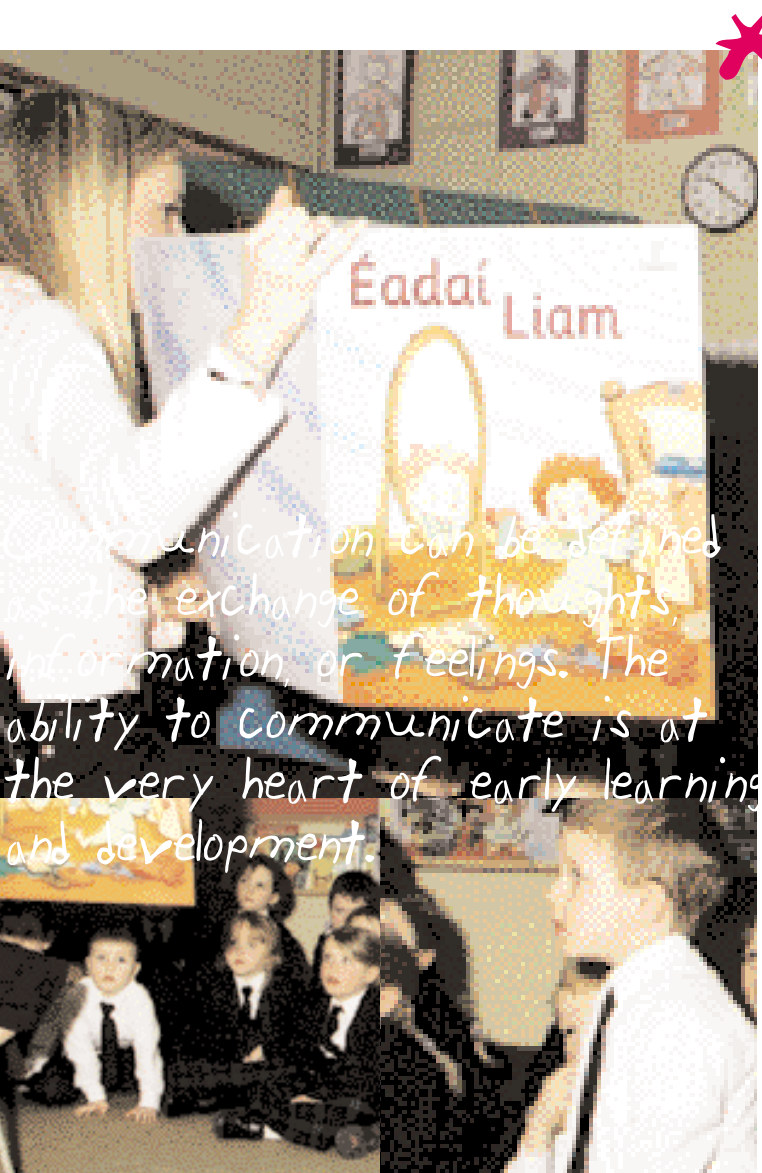
An emerging sense of identity and belonging includes a spiritual and moral dimension. Children should be encouraged to appreciate the wonder and reverence of their everyday experiences. For many children, this will also be supported by particular traditions of belief and devotion. Evidence for children's early spiritual lives can be sought among their perception and awareness of, and response to ordinary activities that can act as signals of transcendence.

Children also develop identities as learners, having different learning styles and dispositions. Some may like to actively engage with their environment, while others may be more reflective and thoughtful.



Identity is a complex combination of characteristics, traits, and behaviours. These contribute to a child's uniqueness, as well as to t





### Babies

Strong emotional attachments form the basis for the child's developing sense of identity and belonging. Babies need to form secure, loving relationships in the initial weeks and months of their lives. Babies are made aware of their own existence and of the existence of others, when others talk to them, gaze at them and touch them (Alvarez, 1992). Physical closeness gives young babies physical, psychological, and emotional comfort.

These attachments can be with mothers, fathers, guardians, grandparents, siblings and key adults in early childhood settings. The quality of these attachments is linked to the baby's developing sense of self. The feedback and recognition which others provide help to ensure that babies feel good about themselves.

### Toddlers

Toddlers continue to benefit from the security and warmth of loving relationships with significant adults in their lives. Interactions within these attachments continue to provide the basis for the development of a positive self-concept. They also enable toddlers to establish relationships with peers and other adults, and encourage them to learn more about the world around them using their own initiative and in partnership with others.

Toddlers will benefit from being given certain levels of responsibility and independence within safe, clearly communicated and understood limits. Toddlers need sufficient time to complete tasks to their own satisfaction, and will need praise and encouragement to develop positive learning dispositions such as perseverance and risk-taking. Adults can be responsive to toddlers' frustrations in their attempts to complete certain tasks by providing ongoing encouragement and support.

### Young children

As children progress, they interact with others more purposefully and in more complex and sophisticated ways. They learn to discriminate between different types of relationships by interacting with various adults. These interactions play a significant role in social and other areas of development.

Peer relations also provide a context for developing socially and for understanding fairness, difference of opinion, conflict resolution, and responsibility. As young children progress through the later stages of early childhood, they benefit from having opportunities to socialise with peers on a continuous basis.

Young children develop an increasing awareness of difference, and internalise this within the limits of their cognitive powers. Having opportunities to spend time with diverse groups of peers will help to discourage stereotypical beliefs and attitudes. Children can also explore issues of diversity through play. Through the support of an adult, play can lead to situations which develop young children's understanding of the unfairness of exclusion, inequalities, and prejudice.

Young children also need support in their spiritual development through opportunities for wonder, reverence and aesthetic appreciation. The natural world provides many opportunities for this.

### Theme: Communication

Communication can be defined as the exchange of thoughts, information, or feelings. The ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development. Most children are naturally disposed to communicate. This enables them to establish and maintain social relationships with others, to express and to share their thoughts and feelings, to represent and to understand the world around them. Communication is also intricately connected to and contributes to children's cognitive development, as well as their sense of identity and belonging.

Communication embraces many different means of giving and receiving information. These include non-verbal, pre-verbal, verbal, and symbolic. The different communicative forms generally reflect different developmental stages during early childhood. While most children will use all forms, eventually developing increasingly sophisticated verbal communication skills, some children will rely more heavily on other forms. Some children may have delayed language development or different patterns of language development and may need to use a range of intentional and non-verbal means of communication, including pictorial, symbolic, or gestural systems. Whatever system is suitable, it is essential that all children are empowered to communicate to the best of their ability from the earliest possible age. A facilitating and responsive environment plays an important role in supporting and nurturing this communication.

For most children, language becomes the dominant form of communication. In this document, language embraces oral, written, and manual communication and consists of content (or vocabulary and word meaning), form/syntax (or sounds and sentence structure), and social use of language. Like all forms of communication, language provides a means to interact with others, to express feelings, and to share experiences. Language exchanges between adults and children enable the child to become a confident and competent language user.

Learning to communicate in early childhood is shaped by two main factors: children's own abilities and their environment. The adult should aim to provide an environment in which each child's attempts to communicate are encouraged. Children will imitate the adults around them, who in turn reinforce and sustain their communication by modelling more elaborate forms, whether in one or more languages. Research by Wijnroks (1998) shows the impact of early supportive interactions on cognitive abilities and well-being. Reliance on mothers during emotional challenges at six to nine months have been linked with cognitive and language skills at age two years (Robinson and Acevedo, 2001). For children with communication/language delay and difficulties, strategically focused interactions may be needed to develop the child's vocabulary, sentence structure, and range of language use.

Communication and language are interlinked with the development of literacy (reading and writing) for most children. This begins to occur from an early age:

Literacy is rooted in a general symbolising capacity that develops in the first year of life and this ability is so distinctive of human thinking and behaviour that it can be thought of as the distinguishing feature of human development.

(Whitehead, 1997, p.160)

The Primary School Curriculum highlights the central role of oral language and emphasises the integration of oral language, reading, and writing:

The child's ability with oral language can be a determining factor in the speed and effectiveness with which (s)he makes progress in reading, just as reading will extend vocabulary and enhance control of sentence structure.

(1999a, p.2)

Wall also identifies the importance of enriching the child's oral language, and the creation of an environment where literacy is valued and enjoyed:

Of the many types of home activities which can foster language development, the quality of the verbal exchanges between parent and child are of paramount importance in creating a rich language experience for the child. Additionally, children are more likely to develop positive attitudes towards reading and writing if they are immersed from a young age in a 'print-rich environment' where they have positive role models and where they regularly experience the enjoyment of written language and perceive its relevance and usefulness.

(1999, p.14)

Children's literacy development begins in the world around them, in the signs and symbols of everyday life, and in print in the environment, such as on packaging for food and toys. Early childhood setting displays can develop this print awareness. This emergent literacy is further developed through story picture books and opportunities of having stories told/read to them.

These experiences are also important in extending vocabulary, and in increasing awareness of the different uses and functions of language. A wealth of opportunities to read and to share stories helps children in the creation of their own stories, and in their retelling of familiar stories. Children who are familiar with rhymes generally have a strong basis from which phonological awareness can develop. Play, and in particular role play, fantasy, and socio-dramatic play are important in giving children early literacy and numeracy opportunities, as outlined in more detail in section three. Through their efforts at mark-making and through the support of an adult or older child, they gradually develop standard writing skills. These are important foundations for reading and writing. Early experiences with books, when shared with caring adults, are also associated with emotional security and pleasure, and help nurture children's sense of identity and belonging.

In terms of languages, most children learn to speak English in the home, and learn Irish when they start school. Other children learn Irish first, and learn English later. Some children may learn both languages simultaneously, developing bilingually at an early age. Young children who speak Irish as part of their daily routine may live in the Gaeltacht, or may live in Irish-speaking homes throughout the country. An increasing number of children experience much of their early learning through the medium of Irish in naíonraí and in junior classes in Gaelscoileanna. Adults can support their learning of Irish or English as an additional language by talking about objects and events in the immediate context using simple sentences. Other languages used by children in contemporary Ireland include Irish Sign Language, Irish Traveller Cant, and languages brought by newcomers such as refugees, asylum seekers and other persons. Children who speak these languages have access to a rich linguistic heritage, and can develop skills and awareness in more than one language.

The benefits to children of being bilingual at an early age include self-esteem, positive identity, and attitudes towards language learning, cognitive flexibility, increased problem-solving, and a greater metalinguistic awareness (Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000). This makes it easier to learn other languages. These researchers also note that where children are sequentially bilingual (learning their second language later, for example, in school), it is important that they are supported in

continuing to develop their home language because their second language development is dependent on this.

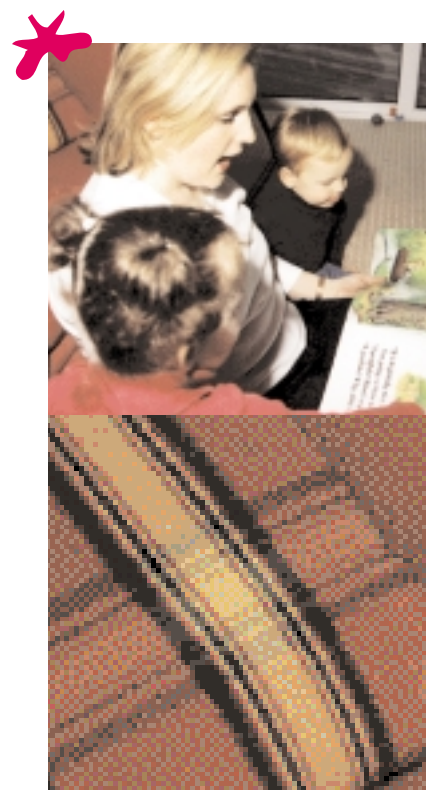
Children who are deaf and hard of hearing have enormous potential, both independently and with adult support, to communicate effectively and to overcome challenges. Babies born with a severe hearing loss will use the part of their brain which is used for language in hearing babies and adults, to extend the part generally used for vision (Karmiloff-Smith, 1994). Dockrell and Mercer (1999) acknowledge there is increasing recognition that children who are deaf and hard of hearing need to develop their skills and competencies in the modalities of both sign and speech. There needs to be an awareness that these children also rely on other sources of information, for example visual and tactile sources. Whatever means of communication children develop, appropriate supports need to be provided by informed adults at the earliest opportunity.

#### Babies

Most babies are enthusiastic and highly motivated communicators. They engage in interactive communications through facial expressions, eye contact, vocalisations such as cooing and babbling, and physical gestures such as pointing. These provide the basis for more sophisticated communication later on. Adults can actively encourage socially referenced communication by talking and listening, by making eye contact, and by using facial expressions and other gestures. A sense of playfulness is important in these early communicative exchanges to encourage babies and to use communication in a fun and enjoyable manner. It also provides a context for developing social skills such as turn-taking.

As the communication system develops, babies' early language reflects the 'here and now' in terms of the significant people, experiences and objects in the baby's environment. Adults can use books, pictures, posters, songs and nursery rhymes to further enhance this environment. Such an environment is important in extending babies' language awareness and use. These opportunities have the additional purpose of initiating babies into particular social and cultural systems. This initiation is central to developing their sense of identity and belonging.

Other forms of communication and creative



Identity is a complex combination of characteristics, traits, and behaviours. These contribute to a child's uniqueness, as well as to their

expression, such as dance, music and song, visual arts and drama will also bring great joy to babies.

### Toddlers

Toddlers' communicative capacities generally expand at an enormous rate as they become more purposeful in their communication with others. Their growing interests and experiences provide many opportunities for communication and learning through language.

Adults can use toddlers' growing understanding of the functional use of language by encouraging them to question, predict, suggest, recount, and respond. Many opportunities for this emerge in conversations about objects and experiences familiar to the child. The adult can scaffold the conversations so that the child can contribute and learn the social rules of interaction. Toddlers also benefit from opportunities to listen to stories, to talk about pictures, and to learn rhymes and songs. Like babies, toddlers can learn from, and derive great satisfaction from other forms of communication and creative expression.

### Young children

Language increasingly becomes a way of learning for young children. They demonstrate an increasing capacity and desire to enter into conversations with both peers and adults. Alongside this, they show a growing ability to represent their thoughts and ideas symbolically in the form of pictures, numbers, and written words.

Conversations with young children naturally evolve to include more complex thought and language. They can be encouraged to question, discuss, describe, give reasons, and recount stories of their own experiences, or to retell stories. Young children should also experience language in an increasingly diverse range of forms, and will enjoy listening and responding to stories, poems, rhymes, action songs, and playing with words. At school this will involve both Irish and English. They will also benefit from a print-rich environment and from other aspects of an emergent literacy programme.

Young children can also benefit from hearing a second language spoken at regular predictable times of the day. Snack-time or a particular activity can be conducted through the second language so that children may gradually build up understanding and production of the associated

language. Young children should also be encouraged to engage with and to respond to other forms of expression, for example music, dance, visual arts, and drama. This contributes significantly to the children's understanding and ability to use language expressively. They also learn to express their own ideas, feelings, and understandings in symbolic form. Through drawing, painting, and making written marks, they become familiar with the dynamics of print, which helps them when learning to write later on. These experiences also enhance the children's perception and knowledge of the world and their interactions with others. This helps in gaining multiple perspectives and a higher level of understanding.

### Theme: Exploring and thinking

Exploring and thinking involves cognitive thinking, communication, sensory-motor skills, and physical development in order to investigate and make sense of the environment. Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for active exploration, and for interpreting this experience. In so doing, the child uses his/her intelligence and imagination to think in convergent and divergent ways. The attachments children have with significant adults in their lives act as a secure base for this exploration and thinking. When the child feels securely attached and/or in close proximity to his/her attachment figure(s), he/she feels safe and can engage in 'exploratory behaviour' (Holmes, 1993, p.432).

Building on earlier work by Piaget and others, Hutt (1979) suggested that children explore to find out what things do, and when they have discovered some of their properties, they play to find out what they themselves can do with these things. The curiosity of the child, as well as his/her ability to take risks in discovery, provides a firm basis on which creativity can be developed. The child may use various parts of the body such as fingers, hands, mouth, and so on to feel, touch, and explore items of interest. This exploration is carried out through play, and is related to the developing sense of self. It also leads to mark-making which serves as a signifier of his/her existence. The child will represent his/her world, and his/her interpretation of experience, with toys and other objects, as well as with more conventional mark-making tools such as crayons.

Even as young as one month, babies are involved in thinking and making connections, by organising their perceptions and linking them with previous experiences. They are also involved in interpreting sounds and language. Memory enables the development of object permanence whereby the child knows that an object continues to exist even though it may be out of sight. This enables them to internally represent and think about objects, as well as people, that are familiar to them but which may not be visible. In time, the transition to symbolism enables the child to represent experiences, and to understand the representations used by others, marking a turning point in how he/she thinks. All of this is critical for the emergence of literacy and numeracy.

The interaction between the child as a learner and the more advanced learner or the adult, as well as the interaction between peer learners, is critically important. This points to the social nature of learning, and to the 'gap' which exists for a child between what he/she can achieve alone and that which he/she can achieve with the assistance of others. This is developed more fully in section three. Communication is a necessary part of this interaction with others and enables meanings and thoughts to be shared and interpreted. Language, including oral, written, or manual, also enables the child to clarify, organise, and explore concepts and ideas, as well as to make sense of the complexity of his/her experience in the environment. The link between language and concept formation, which is central to cognitive development, has been described as 'a kind of inner speech...the dialogue we have with ourselves in our head' (Meek, 1991, p.33). Communication also enables the sharing of culture between the young learner and the adult, and helps the child understand social norms and conventions.

As the child develops physically, there are greater opportunities for active exploration. This exploration helps him/her to become increasingly aware of himself/herself as separate from others, while at the same time recognising how he/she is similar and different to others. Senses and movement enable the child to understand how things work in the environment, to engage with it in a playful and enquiring way, and to make connections. This in turn extends the child intellectually. Children also need to experience freedom of choice in exploratory play. This is an important foundation for the development of inner discipline, as well as a source of decision-making.





**Babies**

As babies strive to make sense of the world in which they live, their early engagement with this world is multi-sensorial: looking, listening, tasting, touching, and smelling. Their early attachment provides the secure base which enables them to explore with confidence.

Babies learn to discriminate between familiar and unfamiliar noises and voices, and to respond and behave in differing ways. For example, babies may turn their heads towards the source of a familiar voice. They may also explore their own reflection in a mirror and react excitedly. They discover their hands and other objects by placing them in their mouths. They look for toys that fall from their grasp, and repeat actions which make them or others laugh.

Physical exploration will provide experience of the simple but important laws of cause and effect. For example, they discover that if a rattle is shaken, it makes a noise. They learn that a cry brings the attention of an adult, and that a smile brings a smile in return. They come to know the sounds of a routine activity like bath-time, and can respond in anticipation.

**Toddlers**

Physical development offers toddlers greater opportunities to play within their environment by imitating, imagining, and discovering. It also enables them to socialise with peers, particularly in a playful context. Toddlers can derive enormous benefit from listening to each other, by sharing understandings, ideas and feelings, and by 'scaffolding' each other's thinking. For example, a toddler may learn to climb onto a bed using a cardboard box by watching and imitating a peer. These interactions are of paramount importance in extending children's learning in all the developmental domains.

The toddlers' increasing cognitive capacities enable them to enter into relations at an increasingly complex level with those who are less familiar to them, including both adults and peers. Their growing sense of self and the self-assurance which attachments with others engender, encourage them to broaden out their exploration. This enables them to engage in social relations, often in the absence of their parents/guardians, and to develop emotionally.

Toddlers' cognitive capacities also enable them to make connections and to categorise. They display an increasing awareness and perception of difference. Because these perceptions lay the foundations for lifelong worldviews, it is important that toddlers should have opportunities to engage with others from socially diverse groups. These include groups from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds, and peers of varying abilities. These early experiences should enhance the toddlers' own feelings of self-worth as well as his/her perceptions of the worth of others who appear to be different. Adults have a key role to play in modelling positive attitudes to diversity.

Toddlers may experience frustration as their impulse to explore may be curtailed or restricted by their stage of development, their abilities or by limits imposed by caregivers for their safety. Gradually, they begin to put themselves in the place of others, and to reflect more on experience. Thus they develop a greater capacity to wait for their needs to be met and to accept refusal. Toddlers can also explore their own preferences and express likes and dislikes.

**Young children**

The young child's physical development enables him/her to continue to explore the environment, and to satisfy his/her natural curiosity. He/she begins to explore within the boundaries of games, often deriving great pleasure from games with rules. He/she may enjoy construction play and discovering how things work. Physical play develops to a more complex level.

The emergence of systems of symbolic representation is a major characteristic of the cognitive development in most three to four year old children. This enables the child to use signs and symbols such as gestures, images and words to represent objects, actions and events. Young children benefit from having a range of opportunities to develop these capacities through play, language, and creative and design activities. This provides the foundation for emergent literacy and numeracy.

Young children also need opportunities to develop their thinking creatively, to develop as problem-solvers, and to develop other skills such as sorting, matching, and ordering. These skills enable them to explore their environment in more sophisticated ways, and to interpret this experience more creatively.

The adult can play an important role by encouraging children to question, to experiment with ideas, to overcome obstacles and difficulties, and to develop divergent as well as convergent thinking. Young children can also be helped to develop other dispositions such as curiosity, openness, perseverance, optimism and risk-taking.

**FOCUS QUESTIONS**

How useful do you think it is to present learning through themes in the framework? Why/Why not?

Given children's different abilities and needs, do you think presenting learning through themes has the potential to support all children in all areas of their learning?

Would you suggest alternative themes? If so, what themes?

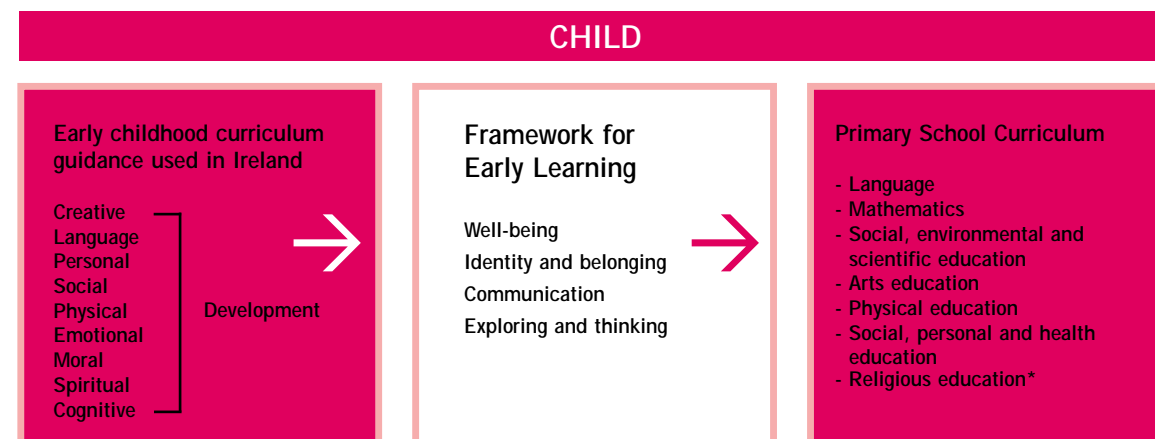
**2.6 Connections across curriculum guidance**

The child is the starting point for the adult in planning for and supporting his/her learning. Early childhood practitioners in Ireland have a long tradition of supporting this learning and development in the cognitive, creative, emotional, language, moral, personal, physical, social, and spiritual areas. The Framework for Early Learning will continue to support all these areas and in this way complement existing curriculum guidance and practices. The four themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking) are proposed for this purpose. They are based on understanding early learning as being holistic and integrated. They link naturally and coherently to the curriculum areas of the Primary School Curriculum (1999a), which is used to support most children's learning as they progress through the education system.



*The child is the starting point for the adult in planning for and supporting his/her learning. Early childhood practitioners in Ireland have a long tradition of supporting this learning and development in the cognitive, creative, emotional, language, moral, personal, physical, social, and spiritual areas.*

Figure 2.1: Connections across curriculum guidance



\*Religious education is the responsibility of the different church groups.

The progression in early learning, as currently supported by the different curriculum guidance used in this country, is represented graphically in Figure 2.1. This outlines how the framework can embrace and complement current curriculum work, and provide coherent links with the later stages in children's learning, primarily that supported by the Primary School Curriculum. The principles underpinning this curriculum, for example the uniqueness of the child, the integrated nature of the curriculum, the child as an active agent in his/her own learning, and the importance of learning being conceived and presented in a holistic way through themes and topics, correspond to many of those which emerge in this and in succeeding sections of this consultative document. These principles underpin how early learning should be supported. Continuity and progression in learning across early childhood is essential in supporting children to learn to their true potential.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This section focuses on the child as a learner and what he/she brings to the learning process. It proposes a thematic approach as a means of articulating learning in the framework. Four themes, which encompass all the developmental domains, are suggested and described. Section five gives more detail on the framework by elaborating on each theme through aims, goals, suggested learning experiences, and exemplars of learning.

### Box 2.1: The child as a learner – emerging key principles in this section

- The child is an active learner, making sense of his/her environment through the senses, movement and language.
- The child learns within the context of warm and supportive attachments and relationships which encourage interaction, exploration and communication.
- Each child is unique, developing and learning at different rates. Learning should be meaningful and relevant and linked to the child's interests, strengths, and life experiences.
- Each child should develop a positive self-image and strong sense of self-esteem.
- The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity, and fairness has positive life-long implications.
- All aspects of early learning are interconnected: children should experience a broad and balanced range of learning experiences where all dimensions of development are equally important and are interwoven.



*The principles underpinning this curriculum, for example the uniqueness of the child, the integrated nature of the curriculum, the child as an active agent in his/her own learning, and the importance of learning being conceived and presented in a holistic way through themes and topics, correspond to many of those which emerge in this and in succeeding sections of this consultative document.*





\* Play is a powerful context for learning.

\* Contexts for learning



- 3.1 Introduction to section three
- 3.2 The child
- 3.3 The child with the adult
- 3.4 The child's different relationships
- 3.5 Learning through play
- 3.6 Linking the two contexts - relationships and play
- 3.7 The learning environment
- 3.8 Conclusion

### 3.1 Introduction to section three

Learning is a continuous process, which occurs within all the environments experienced by the young learner. During early childhood, children learn through their senses, and through active engagement with the people, the objects, events and experiences in these environments. This section explores relationships and play, as the key contexts for learning and demonstrates how they can support all children in their early learning. Through this exploration, the section elucidates the centrality of language as a tool for learning in both relationships and play. It also illustrates how learning through the four proposed themes for the framework—well-being, identity and belonging, communication and exploring and thinking—can be supported through relationships and play.

#### RELATIONSHIPS AS A CONTEXT FOR LEARNING

### 3.2 The child

Children have a fundamental need to be with familiar, loving adults and other children during early childhood. It is through these relationships that their basic needs for food, warmth, protection, and companionship are most often met. This inclination for social contact is instrumental in supporting and encouraging children as learners.

The importance of warm and trusting relationships in early childhood is immediately evident from birth. A newborn baby can be comforted by many, but he/she soon differentiates between people, and shows preference for primary caregivers. As discussed in section two, attachments through which the baby's needs are met consistently and in a caring and respectful way, provide the foundation for the child's well-being, and help him/her to develop a sense of self and an identity, making learning more enjoyable, rewarding and successful. The security provided by these attachments also helps the child to develop a sense of self-confidence and assurance to explore and to express himself/herself. The child is also better equipped to cope with change, which may often involve frustration and uncertainty. This self-assured child is more resilient in adverse situations, both throughout early childhood, as well as in later childhood and adulthood.

Other relationships are also important for the child's development. These include relationships with other adults as well as with peers. It is through all of these that early learning occurs. This supports the image of children as 'social actors' in the learning process since learning occurs when

...the child is interacting with people in his environment and in co-operation with peers.

(Vygotsky, 1978)

The young learner develops an understanding of the world through actions and by interpreting what he/she sees, hears, touches, tastes, and smells. The adult supports him/her in this interpretation of experiences and in using these interpretations to formulate and test hypotheses and arrive at new understandings. In this way, understanding emerges and develops through the child's own actions and interpretations, and through his/her interactions and partnerships with adults, and other children.

...we have begun to think again of the child as a social being – one who plays and talks with others, learns through interactions with parents and teachers – ...because we have come once more to appreciate that through social life, the child acquires a framework for integrating experience, and learning how to negotiate meaning... "Making sense" is a social process...

(Bruner and Haste, 1987, p.1)

Relationships are thus a critical context for early learning. This has particular implications for how adults should interact with children and assist them in their learning. This is examined in subsection 3.6.

### 3.3 The child with the adult

Adults have the power to make a major difference to children's lives and their development by what they offer to children and by how they behave towards them...

(Lindon, 1993, p.75)

This statement captures the centrality of the adult in facilitating and extending a child's learning. Farquhar (1995) argues that simply watching children grow and providing them with activities and objects does not qualify as supporting learning. The adult must play a pro-active role. And it is the quality of his/her interactions with the child in this role which determines the actual impact on learning (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001).

Bruner (1978, 1996) describes the adult 'scaffolding' the child's learning:

As a teacher, you do not wait for readiness to happen; you foster or "scaffold" it by deepening the child's powers at the stage where you find him or her now.

(Bruner, 1996, p.120)

The adult achieves this 'scaffolding' using many strategies as outlined in subsection 3.6. These usually involve talk and discussion with the child in contexts of mutual interest and enjoyment to support him/her in developing new ideas, 'discovering' new information, modifying his/her thinking in light of this new information (Clay and Cazden, 1990), and in articulating his/her thinking. Such talk and discussion helps to reinforce and extend the child's development in his/her first language, which is crucial for the child's development in all other areas, especially emotionally and cognitively.

The adult carefully provides the degree of support required by the child, increasing or lessening it in accordance with the child's growing confidence and achievement. Early learning is therefore enabled and enriched through a partnership based on the notion of interaction as tutoring (Bruner and Bornstein, 1989; Wood, 1989). The adult plays a crucial role in this tutorial relationship by planning for the child's learning, monitoring the child's level of engagement with the task, and providing the support which ensures maximum challenge and enables new learning to occur (McGough, 2002). Reciprocity is pivotal in this relationship, whereby sometimes the child leads the learning through self-initiated and self-directed learning, and sometimes the adult leads



through planned and guided activities. In this way, the child is pro-active and purposefully engaged in the learning process supported and guided by the adult.

Laevers (1995) identifies three central elements of quality in adult-child interactions. He proposes that autonomy is crucial, promoting independence, self-initiative and responsible choice in children through for example, an appropriate freedom to experiment, to make judgements, to choose activities, and to express ideas. This is linked to the adult's approach to handling conflict, rules and behaviour. Secondly, sensitivity to the child's feelings is also important, enabling the adult to empathise and respond to the child's needs. Finally, the adult's interest and the manner in which he/she intervenes in the child's learning and the substance of that intervention are central. Grolnick, Deci and Ryan (1997) in their work on the impact of parenting on children's psychological and educational welfare, suggest three critical dimensions of the parent-child relationship, similar to Laevers'. They suggest that the time parents/guardians devote to their children, and the degree of warmth and caring in the relationships are important.

Parents'/guardians' aspirations and expectations for their children, and the standards of behaviour they set, also influence children's learning.

The Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice for the Early Start Preschool Intervention Project (1998) provide additional insights into the nature of the interactions adults should have with children. The guidelines state that in their relationships, children need to

- experience sensitivity from adults
- experience adult support to help them think, make choices, and negotiate conflict in developmentally appropriate ways
- mix meaningfully with others
- experience a sense of self-worth and self-importance
- be enabled to understand, respect and celebrate difference
- be supported in developing sensitivity to others.

The adult enhances early learning through a respectful understanding of the uniqueness of each child. Using this information, he/she plans for and supports the child's present learning, and plans for the next stages in an informed manner. This involves the adult in reflective practice, in

which he/she continually observes and strives to understand the child's learning, evaluates his/her own role and actions, and adapts future interactions to reflect these insights. This reflective process, detailed in section four, enables the adult to appropriately support learning for each child.

This active adult participation in the child's learning is important and necessary for all children. It is especially so for children with learning disabilities and for those experiencing educational disadvantage. These children often require more highly structured and planned learning programmes where the level of structure provided by the adult is related to the child's level of need (McGough, 2002). These programmes are more effective in addressing children's specific needs, as well as providing them with experiences which support all areas of learning and development. While the level of structure and adult input in the learning may be significant, the important consideration is the type of adult-child interactions which occur.

### 3.4 The child's different relationships

This document uses the term 'adult' to refer to all adults who work with children in the first six years of life. Different adults, however, bring different experiences and knowledge to bear on how they support and extend children's learning. The following subsections distinguish between the child's relationship with the early childhood practitioner, and the relationship with his/her parents/guardians. In doing so, they outline how these relationships play important and complementary roles in supporting learning. The benefits of the child's relationships with other children are also explored.

#### The child and the early childhood practitioner

The early childhood practitioner (individual who works with children in a specialised manner in out-of-home settings) extends the role of parents/guardians in children's early lives. He/she makes a uniquely significant and lasting impact on children's experiences as young learners, and consequently, on their life chances. Practitioners in Ireland have a variety of qualifications and training, which give them an insightful understanding of how and what children learn. This knowledge influences how the practitioner plans for, supports, and contributes to children's learning. The practitioner's expertise and

experiences enable him/her to support and advise parents/guardians on what they can do to extend and reinforce learning that has taken place elsewhere. It is also important that practitioners can ensure continuity between the home and the early childhood setting in terms of language in the case of children who are learning Irish as a first language, or who may be becoming bilingual at an early age.

The practitioner plays an additional important role in the case of children who experience difficulties in learning. Because of his/her expert knowledge and experiences, the practitioner is often the first to become aware of potential learning disabilities and/or developmental delays. If unattended, these can impact negatively on the child's experiences as a learner and on his/her progression in learning. In collaboration with the parents/guardians, the practitioner can help to arrange the involvement of specialist professionals such as a nurse, paediatrician, psychologist, specialist teacher or therapist to provide the appropriate services to the child and his/her family. Section four presents a more detailed discussion of supporting children with special educational needs.

#### The child and his/her parents/guardians

Parents/guardians have enormous influence on their children's lives, and especially during the early months and years (Ball, 1994). The Primary School Curriculum (1999a) states that parents/guardians are their children's primary educators, laying the foundations for all learning. Their relationships with their children are qualitatively different from the relationships children develop with other adults. The care and attention children receive from their parents/guardians, and the examples they are given, have a powerful impact on their formation as young learners.

As learning is more pronounced and much faster in the early years of life, parents/guardians play a key role in helping children to learn and to develop in all areas: physical, emotional, social, language, cognition, moral, spiritual, and so on. They achieve this through their relationships, conversations, activities, and their routines with their children. These include listening and talking to their children about what they are doing and experiencing, reading, telling and discussing stories, rhymes and poems, involving children in real-life activities such as setting the table and shopping, and playing with their children in a

range of activities. Important opportunities also include parents/guardians partnering their children in singing, playing music and responding to rhythms, and in outdoor adventures such as walks and trips, alerting their children to signs, sounds, textures, buildings, trees, flowers, animals, vehicles, people, and noises in the environment. In this way, parents/guardians support their children's learning in a manner which is fun, appealing, and relevant to their children's lives.

Given the tremendous influence parents/guardians can have on their children's early learning, it is imperative that parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners communicate and collaborate where children attend out-of-home settings. Communication built on mutual respect can have a positive impact on learning. Research indicates that where parents/guardians are actively encouraged and become involved in their children's learning in out-of-home settings, there are substantial gains for all. These gains include enhanced parental understanding of appropriate early learning experiences, and positive influences on cognitive and social development that improve children's later educational success. This is especially true in the case of children who are experiencing educational disadvantage where the provision for their early learning is of a high quality (Ferri and Saunders, 1991; Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997; Leseman, 1998). Hayes, O'Flaherty and Kernan (1997) suggest that the quality of early learning is influenced by the extent to which parents/guardians and practitioners communicate. Supportive and trusting relationships enable parents/guardians and practitioners to share information, insights, and assessments which are important in planning learning experiences based on appropriate goals and priorities. This approach better supports and encourages all children. In the case of children with special educational needs, parents/guardians often need to be supported by other specialists such as therapists, who play a critical role in helping them to establish effective early interactions with their children. It is essential that such information is co-ordinated and presented to parents/guardians in a way that takes cognisance of the wider family needs. The early childhood practitioner is often instrumental in this process. This partnership between parents/guardians, practitioners and other professionals is explored in more detail in section four.





Children design their own simple games with negotiated rules. In time, they partake in more conventional games with external rules such as word and number games, matching or board games, and more physical games such as skittles, hopscotch and football.



**The child and other children**

Children learn with and from each other. They play and talk together about what they are seeing, hearing, doing, feeling and thinking as they share ideas and thoughts. This sharing of experiences and information can in turn accelerate each child's learning, and help him/her towards an understanding of different perspectives and in developing a 'theory of mind' (Bruce, 1996), i.e., an understanding of the way others think and feel. In this way, interactions with peers can contribute positively to the child's sense of self and sense of others as he/she becomes aware of the connections, similarities and differences between his/her world and the world of others. This is particularly important as Ireland's population becomes increasingly multi-cultural. Building learning partnerships with peers then helps children to establish a sense of identity and belonging, a theme suggested for the Framework for Early Learning. This in turn helps children's social development as they interact with others (Bee, 1992).

The adult should, where possible, create opportunities for children to interact with, and to learn from each other. Children need opportunities to play and to talk together. Sensitive and carefully timed input by the adult to these peer interactions can extend and enrich learning at appropriate levels for each child.

**PLAY AS A CONTEXT FOR LEARNING**

In viewing early learning through the relationships lens, this document emphasises the highly interactive and social nature of that learning. Play too is considered a critical context and can support all aspects of the child's learning and development. This section now explores how this is achieved.

**3.5 Learning through play**

Bruce describes play as the 'highest form of learning in early childhood' (2001, p.128). There has been a misleading tendency to present play as the opposite to work, endorsing it as trivial and non-serious. A more helpful approach is to view play along a continuum from pure play to non-play (Moyle, 1994). This presents play as a process; 'an approach to action' (Bruner, 1977, p.v). As a process, we can analyse the different types of play children enjoy and engage in, and how, through adult involvement, these can facilitate learning. This analysis highlights the importance of language in facilitating children's

play, and the role of play in supporting the development and use of language.

A useful typology in analysing the diversity of children's play is that offered by Hutt (1979). (See Figure 3.1.) This typology presents three main types of play:

- **epistemic** – This refers to exploratory play in which children handle objects and materials, and gather knowledge through their senses. This play is fuelled by children's natural curiosity and inquisitiveness as they search for understanding. The knowledge they acquire through their explorations forms the basis for all further knowledge and understanding, which is crucial for them in hypothesising, developing and testing ideas, and in problem-solving. Exploratory play also provides purposeful practice of fine and gross motor skills.
- **ludic** – This refers to children's imaginative, fantasy and socio-dramatic play in which they use their developing language to move from thinking in concrete terms to thinking in the abstract. This is shown in the possibilities they create for the future through 'pretend' scenarios. They practise and rehearse roles, events, situations, and possibilities through this play.
- **games with rules** – Children design their own simple games with negotiated rules. In time, they partake in more conventional games with 'external' rules such as word and number games, matching or board games, and more 'physical' games such as skittles, hopscotch and football.

This diversity in play is important in supporting all aspects of learning and development. Lally (1991, pp.72-74) writes about play offering children opportunities to 'explore and discover, construct, repeat and consolidate, represent, create, imagine, socialise.' But play which supports this learning does not just happen. The adult is central in this process, emphasising the link between relationships and play as key contexts for learning.

Drawing on a wealth of literature (Bruner, 1977; Moyle, 1989 and 1994; Pellegrini and Boyd, 1993; Lindon, 1993 and 2001; Bruce, 1996 and 2001; Sayeed and Guerin, 2000), this document now explores the many ways in which play can support learning across the continuum of children's ability. Many factors have the potential to restrict play in a way which limits its scope in extending learning for some children. Developmental delays and disabilities as well as illnesses can have a profound impact on children's capabilities to play and on the types of play possible for them. Through careful planning, the adult can reduce the potential impact of these factors, enabling the children to reap increased benefits from play, including the sense of exciting enjoyment so often experienced and displayed by children in their early play. This adult support is also critical in introducing the children to a greater range of play in furthering their development.

While the following pages explore and expand on some of the main ways in which play can support early learning, it is important to remember the holistic and integrated nature of learning. Learning and development in one area such

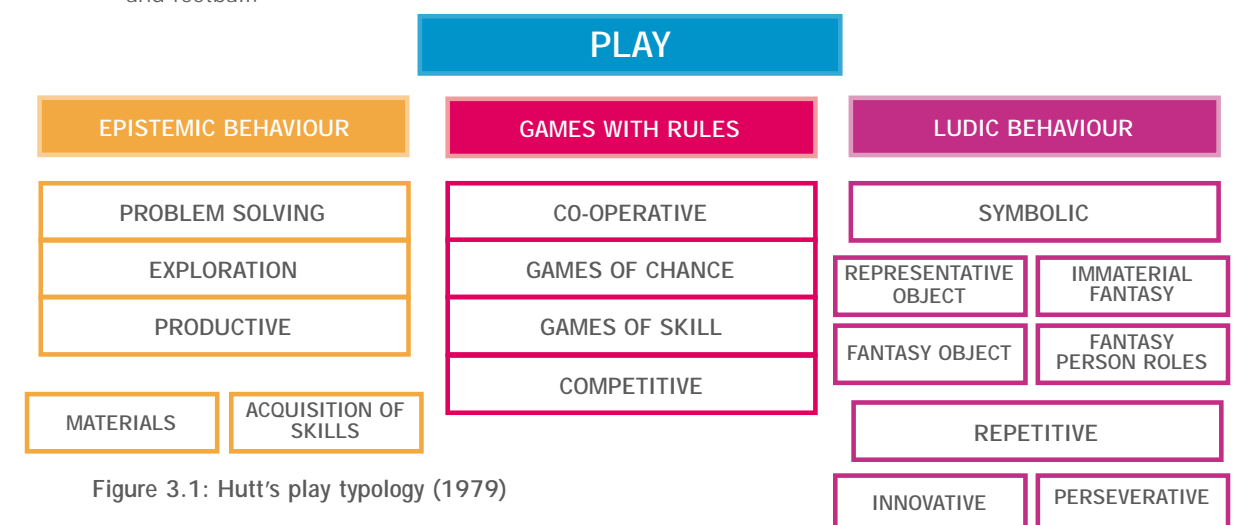


Figure 3.1: Hutt's play typology (1979)

as the physical area, is influenced by and impacts on learning and development in other areas. This is highlighted in section two.

### Box 3.1: Learning through play

Play enables children to

- develop imagination and creativity
- develop an ability to manage emotions
- develop as thinkers
- develop physically
- develop language
- learn to use symbols by laying the foundations for becoming proficient users of various symbolic systems, including literary and numerical systems
- develop social skills, and to develop morally and spiritually.

#### Children develop imagination and creativity

Play is 'a forward feed mechanism into courageous, creative and rigorous thinking in adulthood' (Bruce, 1999, p.40). It enables children to operate at a level beyond their current ability, and to fill roles, exist in situations, environments and even worlds outside their everyday lives (Bruner, 1976; Vygotsky, 1976).

Socio-dramatic play, fantasy, and role-play in particular provide opportunities for children to use their real-life experiences in imaginative and creative ways. Here children can operate beyond their means and shape their own destiny, albeit a pretend destiny. For example, play enables children to 'drive' or to 'build a house' before they are physically and mentally capable of doing so. It enables them to create worlds from their imagination, their interpretation of stories, pictures, programmes, and adventures, and to manage and dictate the happenings in those worlds. This might include children having lunch with the pig, the dog and the cat who refused to assist Little Red Hen in the process of growing grain and baking her cake of bread. It might also involve children in conversing and playing with imaginary characters, determining the actions, thoughts and words of those characters, or in entering the world of dinosaurs, princes and princesses, space aliens, and animals. In contrast, children may become adults in their creative and imaginative play by role-playing shop assistants, post-office personnel, bus/train

drivers, fishermen and women, doctors, pop-stars, or personalities well-known to them. Children may also demonstrate their evolving creative and imaginative capacities through 'art play' such as painting, drawing, clay/dough modelling, constructing, and moving to music. These experiences help children to develop perspective or a 'theory of mind'.

These roles and situations draw on the children's own experiences, but they also frequently reflect a creative and imaginative interpretation of these experiences. This creativity and imagination emerge with the children's growing ability to create and to communicate a past and a future as distinct from a present, and in doing so, to make play more complex and sophisticated. This communication will occur through actions and scripts (words) (Meek, 1991). For example, the child may have a conversation on the 'phone' i.e. the small cardboard box which, for now, symbolises the phone. The child may 'feed' the cuddly bears, enact the construction of the apartment block, or dramatise the story of Cinderella and speculate about the lives of the ugly sisters. Children draw on their personal experiences in developing the scripts they use in their play, highlighting again how language supports play. Children who enjoy very rich language experiences through conversations, stories, rhymes, songs, poems and so on, usually show great variety and richness of language as well as ideas in their scripts. Where children don't have these literary experiences to draw on, the adult needs to provide stimuli for imaginative and creative play through stories, discussions, rhymes, songs, and adult-child dialogue about pictures, objects and events. Supporting children's creativity and imagination in play is also important in encouraging them to be flexible and imaginative thinkers.

#### Children learn to deal with emotions

Managing emotions is an integral part of daily life. Like the development of physical skills, thinking, and language, children need support and assistance in learning how to deal with their feelings.

Play has important therapeutic qualities. It enables children to escape the realities, the challenges, and the difficulties in their lives, and imaginatively and wishfully create their own destiny. As children draw on their own

experiences, feelings and thoughts to 'create' these play scenarios, it is natural for them to express and to enact experiences that may be confusing, upsetting or even distressing for them. They often find play a much easier and less threatening context for articulating their innermost thoughts than through discussion alone. While play itself will not necessarily eliminate difficult feelings, it will help children to manage their emotions and to develop an understanding of others' feelings and associated behaviours. Children with significant behavioural difficulties may need sensitive guidance from an adult to enable them to deal with emotions, both their own and those of other children, that arise during play.



### Children develop as thinkers

...children move from a state of almost complete helplessness to a stage where they are articulate, reasoning human beings, constructing many complex hypotheses about the way the world works.

(Hall, 1987, p.73)

Children learn about their world through their relentless exploration. This exploration yields information about how things work and the connections between things and people. Through informed collaboration with the child, the adult supports him/her in interpreting this information through talk and discussion, and in using it to solve problems, to reason and to infer as he/she creates 'working theories' about the world. These theories evolve and change as more information obtained through play experiences is applied to existing thoughts and ideas, extending them or even radically altering them. This necessitates changes in children's thinking to accommodate new information and new perspectives. The level of this adult support is related to the individual child's capacity for understanding and interpreting, and his/her ability to actively explore the environment, with some children requiring more intensive and sustained input by the adult than others.

Subsection 3.3 emphasises the importance of the quality of the adult's interactions with the child. This reference to quality resonates loudly with regard to the adult's critical role in supporting the child's thinking through play, and helping him/her towards higher-order thinking (Vygotsky, 1978; Wells, 1987). Using challenging and motivating play experiences such as sorting shapes/objects, filling and emptying containers, constructing tall and steady towers, filling food orders in the pretend restaurant, or designing and building a moving vehicle to transport 'loads' from one place to another, the adult gently encourages the child to think through and to analyse ideas, and to work with others to solve problems (Moyles, 1989). This level of thinking develops children's logic, perseverance, and concentrated thought. Vygotsky argues that

In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself.

(1976, p.552)

Vygotsky's perspective suggests that the child's thinking is more sophisticated and more complex when he/she is engaged in play experiences. Bruner (1976) suggests that this may be as a result of play providing more freedom to explore, to experiment with, and to trial real-life activities and events without the fear of error or embarrassment. These 'safe' conditions can motivate and enable the child to organise his/her actions and problem-solving strategies to achieve higher levels of performance (Bruner, 1976).

Play, enriched and supported through an appropriate level of adult input, thus enables children to order and co-ordinate their thinking and learning. This thinking and learning are based on the information available to children from their environment, and their ability both alone and with varying degrees of adult assistance to process this information in constructing new knowledge.

### Children develop, practise and refine physical skills and competencies

Early childhood is a critical time for the development, practice and refinement of physical skills and competencies. During this time, all children need support and opportunities to develop a range of gross and fine motor skills, and to develop increasing levels of dexterity, co-ordination, sophistication and control in their movements. Some of the most effective strategies for achieving this development are repetition and challenge in play.

Play naturally accommodates repetitive and challenging behaviour in an enjoyable, familiar, and interesting way. Repetitive and practice play supports children across the spectrum of physical ability in developing a sense of mastery and competence, reaching the understanding that they have conquered a particular skill. Early opportunities to reach, to grasp, to lift, to drop, to explore through movement and the senses,

and to push/pull objects are critical in using and strengthening muscles, and in developing fine and gross motor movements. These lay the foundations for more sophisticated and co-ordinated movements such as crawling, walking, climbing, jumping, hopping, skipping, cycling, swimming and so on, which children can also develop through play experiences. These experiences might include play scenarios involving 'wheelie' toys such as shopping trolleys, prams, and wheelbarrows which require children to push while walking. Other play situations might involve children using climbing frames, tunnels and skipping ropes, balancing on objects, and developing ball skills such as throwing, catching, bouncing, batting and so on. They may also provide opportunities to cut, to use paint-brushes, writing implements, blocks, jigsaws and puzzles, as well as ICT games, all of which encourage good hand-eye co-ordination. Adult strategies such as modelling, task analysis (breaking the skill into component parts), and enabling through the provision of physical support are important in providing children with the appropriate encouragement and guidance to develop physically. While all children will require some adult involvement, children with physical disabilities/delays benefit from focused and sometimes intensive adult support. This will often necessitate more direct and sustained input in their play.

### Children develop language

Section two highlights how most children progress to using language as their dominant form of communication. Language enables them to learn through asking questions, talking about ideas, events, people, and places, devising theories and searching for answers, as well as displaying what they have learned. Play enriched by an adult is a wonderful context for learning language, as well as learning through language.

Play provides opportunities for children to use their developing language for different purposes: to communicate their feelings, ideas, and thinking. In the early days and months of life, 'parentese' (motherese), in which parents/guardians simplify and adjust their language to suit the child's thinking and communicating abilities, is an important strategy

in playful situations. For example, parents/guardians may communicate playfully with their baby when nappy changing or when the baby is exploring his/her surroundings. These early playful language experiences introduce and reinforce sounds and tones for the child which are found in particular languages or dialects or 'canúintí'. They further introduce the child to the important practice of 'turn-taking' thus laying critical foundations for language development.

As children develop, different types of play become important in further supporting their acquisition of language, and their use of language as a means of learning about their environments. For example, in role, socio-dramatic, and fantasy play, children use their language experiences to create the 'scripts' for their play. In construction and exploratory play, children articulate and share their ideas and 'discoveries', and indicate how their thinking is changing due to new experiences, highlighting the intricate link between language and thinking and play's potential to support both. Through participation in the play and/or support while remaining outside the play scenario, the adult can extend children's vocabulary and model language usage. This is especially important for children experiencing language delay or disability, who need more focused and intensive support in developing their language in early childhood. It is also critical for children whose first language is neither Irish nor English, so that they develop communicative competence and confidence in Irish and/or English. Play also creates opportunities for children to practise the cultural conventions of language use such as turn-taking, eye contact and the use of tone to express emotions. These opportunities see children using and extending language they have heard and learned from more competent language users in an active, functional, and enjoyable way.

Play is also an opportune context for having fun with language. This can involve children in creating nonsense words and in creating a nonsense language understood by the child alone or in partnership with others. It can also include children experimenting with rhyming patterns, in using and creating rhyming stories, in reciting riddles and tongue twisters, singing songs, and in composing sound-effects to accompany stories



and songs, as well as playing with voices in puppet play and in socio-dramatic and fantasy play. These activities again draw upon and build on children's everyday language experiences, necessitating some children to be supported more intensely by adults in their play with language.

As outlined, this document uses the term language to refer to oral, written and manual communication. Where children are deaf or hard of hearing, blind or partially sighted, the adult can help ensure that their play supports the development of appropriate communication systems. This is especially important in early childhood given the existence of 'sensitive periods' in language development.

#### Children learn to use symbols

Most children become competent at using symbols in early childhood. Using and understanding symbols marks their emerging ability to think beyond the here and now, and to imagine the future. This is understood as representational thought.

Life presents children with many symbol systems to master, for example, literacy and numeracy. Each one is a particular code which children must understand in order to use. As play is children's re-enactment of their life experiences, it offers many natural opportunities to use the codes in contexts which are purposeful and meaningful, and fun. Importantly, play creates situations which help to promote and develop children's literacy skills and strategies, and it serves as a language experience through which children can build connections between oral and written modes of expression (Roskos and Christie, 2001).

Recent years have brought a rethinking about how children develop as symbol-users. The idea of being 'ready' for literacy and numeracy has been replaced with the 'emergent' perspective. This new focus recognises literacy and numeracy as key constituents of early play experiences, and the importance of these experiences in cementing the knowledge and practices in the two systems for children. Examples of this early play include pretending to read, writing pretend prescriptions and letters through marks, scribbles and patterns, calculating how much items cost in the pretend

shop, estimating how high the 'bridge' needs to be to allow toy cars travel over the sand-pit, and calculating how many bags of animal feed the farmer needs to feed his cows during the winter. Social experiences such as being read to, retelling stories, sharing rhymes, and songs also support children's development as symbol-users. Play experiences such as these contribute to developing the thinking processes children need in later reading, writing (Roskos and Christie, 2001) and mathematics.

As with thinking and language, play does not automatically support and promote children's emergent literacy and numeracy. The adult can encourage these play experiences and enhance them through discussion, suggestions and problem-solving. He/she can also ensure the provision of appealing literacy and numeracy play materials such as books, pictures, jigsaws, matching puzzles, a range of writing implements, paper, posters, songs, pretend money, signs for shops, road-signs, measuring tapes, thermometers, weighing scales, clocks, and so on. Children who enjoy rich experiences of literacy and numeracy, will incorporate these experiences into their play, and extend and adapt them. But as always, the adult must be mindful that some children will require more deliberate and structured support in developing this play. This is particularly so for children who have fewer 'natural' literary and numeracy experiences in their daily lives, and for those who have particular disabilities and/or developmental delays which impact on their use and understanding of literacy and/or numeracy.

Play then is central in developing children as symbol-users. It enables them to experience and rehearse the relevance of the symbol systems, but more importantly, to enjoy and develop early competence in using them. This enjoyment and sense of accomplishment are crucial in laying foundations for later learning in literacy and numeracy.

#### Children develop socially, morally and spiritually

Children's play reflects their family life, and the community and society in which they live. Play then helps them to learn about what is socially and morally acceptable. This learning helps children to interact with others in ways which are



*Life presents children with many symbol systems to master, for example, literacy and numeracy. Each one is a particular code which children must understand in order to use. As play is children's re-enactment of their life experiences, it offers many natural opportunities to use the codes in contexts which are purposeful and meaningful, and fun.*

appropriate to their culture and society. Play also introduces children to and develops their sense of spirituality. This can be seen in play situations such as observing and learning about the small birds feeding on the breadcrumbs, or the leaves whirling fast in the wind, exploring the minibeasts in the soil, and picking flowers, as well as in day-to-day loving and caring relationships with others. These activities and social contexts can help nurture a sense of reverence and respect for living things.

As with children's imaginative and creative development, a 'theory of mind' is central to their socialisation and their moral and spiritual development. Play helps children to recognise and to understand that others can and often do think differently to them. This understanding of perspectives can be greatly facilitated through play where children present and hear different ideas, suggestions, and descriptions of the same situation or person, all of which reflect personal interpretations. Hearing these differences alerts children to the existence of diverse perspectives. It is also important that the play environment, its materials, and its playthings reflect different cultures, so that children grow and develop in an environment which presents difference as being a natural and essential part of life, as outlined later in subsection 3.7. The adult, in his/her interactions with the children, plays a particularly central role in reinforcing difference as a positive characteristic of daily life.

The dynamism and interaction between these different functions of play combine to make play personally meaningful, purposeful, and enjoyable for children. Play of this calibre can be referred to as 'free-flow play' (Bruce, 1991, 1996) in which children 'wallow' in their ideas, emotions, and relationships. This play engages children in learning at a deep level in which they demonstrate and use the skills and competencies they learned previously, to achieve new learning. Engaging children in this deep level learning is the ultimate goal in supporting them as young learners.



### 3.6 Linking the two contexts - relationships and play

Play is a natural and enjoyable way for children to learn, but as this section demonstrates, this learning does not happen automatically.

...play cannot be left to just natural development. If it is, children do not learn to play well...

(Bruce, 1996, p.3)

Timely adult involvement is important for all children, and as this document emphasises, some children will require more focused and sustained involvement than others. Children are generally highly receptive to this involvement and indeed will often seek it. This involvement can create opportunities for a sense of shared focus in the play which is important in enhancing early learning (Rogoff, 1990).

#### The adult's relationship with children in play

Heaslip (1994) describes the adult's role in children's play as being pro-active. Play can naturally stagnate as children replay situations and activities with little development in their play (although, as we have already seen, repetition is a valid and important learning strategy for children). The adult has a role in guiding and enriching learning by ensuring that children's play experiences are challenging and show development and increasing sophistication, while remaining enjoyable and purposeful, reflecting an appropriate stage in their development and learning.

#### Strategies for the adult

Adult involvement in children's play sees the adult alternate between manager, enabler/guide and player. In fulfilling these roles, he/she uses a number of strategies. Common to all these strategies is the idea of the adult 'scaffolding' learning (see subsection 3.3) making it challenging and achievable for each child.

#### Modelling

The adult is an active participant in the children's play and in their discussions. This might involve him/her modelling how a role might be enacted, how an object might be manipulated or used, or introducing new words/phrases in a meaningful context. This strategy can be particularly helpful

when trying to support a quiet/shy child who lacks confidence to partake in play such as socio-dramatic or role-play, or who is reluctant to explore an unfamiliar object/material. It can also be very effective in assisting a child with a learning disability, as the adult encourages the child to imitate a movement or an action, or to repeat a phrase or a word. Through modelling, the adult can encourage the child to enter the play situation at a level which is comfortable and appealing to him/her.

#### Facilitating

The adult provides materials and props, appropriate nudges, cues, suggestions and so forth without dominating children's play or imposing a passive role upon them. Facilitating and encouraging play also happens through the positive and focused use of conversation. Using children's own ideas as a starting point, the adult provides suggestions and alternatives to develop and extend their play and language. He/she can also provide new words/phrases which can add a new direction or dimension to the play. This richer base opens up more play and language possibilities for the children, and in turn more learning.

#### Enabling

Play, particularly with peers, does not come naturally to all children. Some children can feel unsure in the play situation, for example, they can have difficulty exploring or manipulating objects and materials, expressing thoughts and ideas or in entering into roles. An observant and sensitive adult adopts the role of enabler to assist these children in playing with others, and in being seen and accepted by peers as a contributing player. This may involve becoming a player and remaining with the child for an extended period of time, eventually reducing his/her involvement as the child gains in confidence and ability to contribute to the play. It may also involve the adult in the process of task analysis where he/she breaks the play activity into simple discrete steps for the child. Alternatively, the adult may need to revert back to a previous play experience to build the child's confidence and to make a concrete link with the new play experience. For example, if a child is experiencing difficulty with the action of jumping, the adult may encourage him/her to bounce on a trampoline to experience the sensation of jumping, and to learn to master the necessary movements.

#### Playing

The adult, on invitation by the child, or by his/her own initiative, becomes an active participant in the child's play. In this role, he/she may model new actions/movements, introduce new ideas/characters, ask questions, or suggest new directions to encourage the children to take risks, to be adventurous and curious, and to express their ideas and thinking to consolidate their learning. This articulation can require children to think through their actions and ideas, to be clear, to sequence their thoughts, and to be analytical, bringing them towards higher-order thinking, when learning is potentially deep. Initiating, encouraging, and extending talk and discussion in this way can be very helpful in extending children's learning. Direct involvement in children's play as a player is a particularly effective strategy for children whose capacity for play is impacted by disability/developmental delay or illness. In this case, the adult is an important partner in the child's play, building his/her confidence and using insights into the child's learning, focusing on critical learning moments in the play.

#### Observing and listening

The child is not the sole learner in the play situation. The adult too is a learner. He/she is an observer of children's play and a listener of their play scripts and discussions. These strategies help the adult to understand the play – its context, its 'story', the children's thinking and ideas, their command and range of language, as well as interests and emotions. This information enables the adult to enter the play at opportune points, with sensitivity. But it also allows him/her to extend and enrich the play in the most appropriate way for each child. As an observer and listener, the adult will also be aware of breakdowns in play, and where necessary, intervene to facilitate children in their resolution of conflict.

#### Structuring

Careful and attentive planning, designing, organising, resourcing, and evaluating are important if the environment is to help all children to learn through play. These tasks involve the adult in structuring the outdoor and indoor environments so that there is challenge, relevance, and progression in learning. This responsibility to provide an appropriate environment is explored in more detail in the next subsection.

No one strategy will help individual children to learn optimally. It is only through a careful mix of the different strategies that each child can be supported in a way which meets his/her individual learning needs.

#### Level and intensity of adult involvement

This document repeatedly emphasises the particular importance of the adult-child relationship in supporting children's learning. It equally highlights the fact that the level of input by the adult to the child's learning varies considerably from one child to another.

As articulated in section one, the Framework for Early Learning will support all children in their learning. Each child is a unique individual requiring levels of support and encouragement dictated by his/her ability, strengths and needs as a learner. Some children require significant adult input for extended periods of time, while others will require less, and for different timeframes. Through continual assessment of the child at play, the sensitive and caring adult makes informed decisions about how best he/she can support the child in a responsible and nurturing manner.

In making these key decisions, the adult focuses on reciprocity, a principle outlined earlier in subsection 3.3. This strategy foregrounds respect for the child's own play as a context for learning, while recognising the important contribution to be made by the adult in enabling learning at a deeper level. Adult involvement then varies along a continuum from no intervention, to prompted/guided discovery and learning, to directed discovery and learning (Dempsey and Frost, 1993).

Even though some children require sustained periods of adult support, opportunities for self-initiated play, discovery and adventure are crucial for all children. The adult may intervene periodically at opportune times for certain children during this learning. In other situations, the adult may prompt the child or direct him/her towards new skills, ideas, language and information. This places the adult in the role of a catalyst (Bruce, 2001) so that the child incorporates new learning into his/her own play. The level of direction by the adult will be based on his/her observations of the child, in tandem with the learning goals the adult is working

towards. Whether the adult is prompting or directing, or standing back, the child and adult each have opportunities to lead and to initiate learning. This approach ensures that the child's own play agenda is respected and facilitated, while the adult is enabled to utilise the learning opportunities presented in the play to extend and enrich the child's learning.

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS

Does the role identified for the adult capture the impact that children's differing experiences of childhood may have on their learning?

What challenge(s), if any, do you think the adult experiences in this role?

#### 3.7 The learning environment

Early learning takes place in outdoor and indoor environments. Both of these environments can support all areas of learning by meeting certain criteria (Bilton, 2002). The adult comes into focus again as a key figure.

...it is the teacher's responsibility to create a learning environment that is appropriate for (a child's) development...

(Heaslip, 1989, p.156)

Outdoor and indoor learning environments should be motivating and inviting to all children, so that they are encouraged and helped to explore and to use all the possibilities offered for fun, adventure, challenge and creativity. This is achieved by ensuring that the playthings, equipment, resources, stories, songs, music and games, language, and everyday routines and activities reflect the diversity of children's identities. This is especially important in out-of-home settings which increasingly have children of different cultures, languages and abilities. These children will have different interests, needs and experiences. The learning environment needs to support each child's developing sense of self-worth, as well as nurturing an understanding of and respect for difference. As section two highlights, the evolution of a positive sense of well-being, identity and belonging is critical for each child's success as a learner. In nurturing

these feelings, the outdoor and indoor environments develop children's confidence to express themselves, to make choices, to test ideas, to develop and practise skills, to make discoveries, and to persevere in the face of difficulty and uncertainty.

Reflecting the importance of relationships and play as central contexts for learning, both the outdoor and indoor environments should support interactions between children, and between children and adults. As expressed in subsection 3.6, children's ready access to the adult for assistance, assurance and encouragement is critical. In this way, the adult is an integral part of the environment. The environment should also support the range of children's play. One common strategy in out-of-home settings is to organise the environment in 'learning areas/corners/centres/bays' with each supporting a particular type(s) of play.

Time and space are also important considerations. Children need sufficient time to enter into play, to develop and sustain it in order to reach a level of intense concentration and involvement. This is when deep level learning or learning of a high quality occurs. Alongside this, the environment needs to cater for children's resting, toileting, and feeding needs, as well as their need to be physically active and to expend energy.

Planning is required to ensure that the environment is inclusive. This may involve making resources and equipment accessible at certain heights. For example, resources should be stored/accessible at an appropriate height suitable for children in wheelchairs. Specific types of resources may be desirable, for example, equipment and playthings with strong visual, kinaesthetic or auditory qualities. This is especially important for children with sensory impairments. The size of playthings may be particularly important for children who experience difficulty with co-ordination and manipulative skills. Retaining resources and equipment in the same areas of the learning environment is especially important for children who are blind or who have a sight loss. As before, the adult who is sensitive to children's individual needs is able to shape the environment to meet those needs.

Creating an optimal learning environment for each child requires significant energy and time

from the adult. Time for planning, designing, organising, resourcing and evaluating should be an integral part of his/her daily routine. A variety of curriculum guidance used in Ireland provides support and advice for the adult in these tasks.

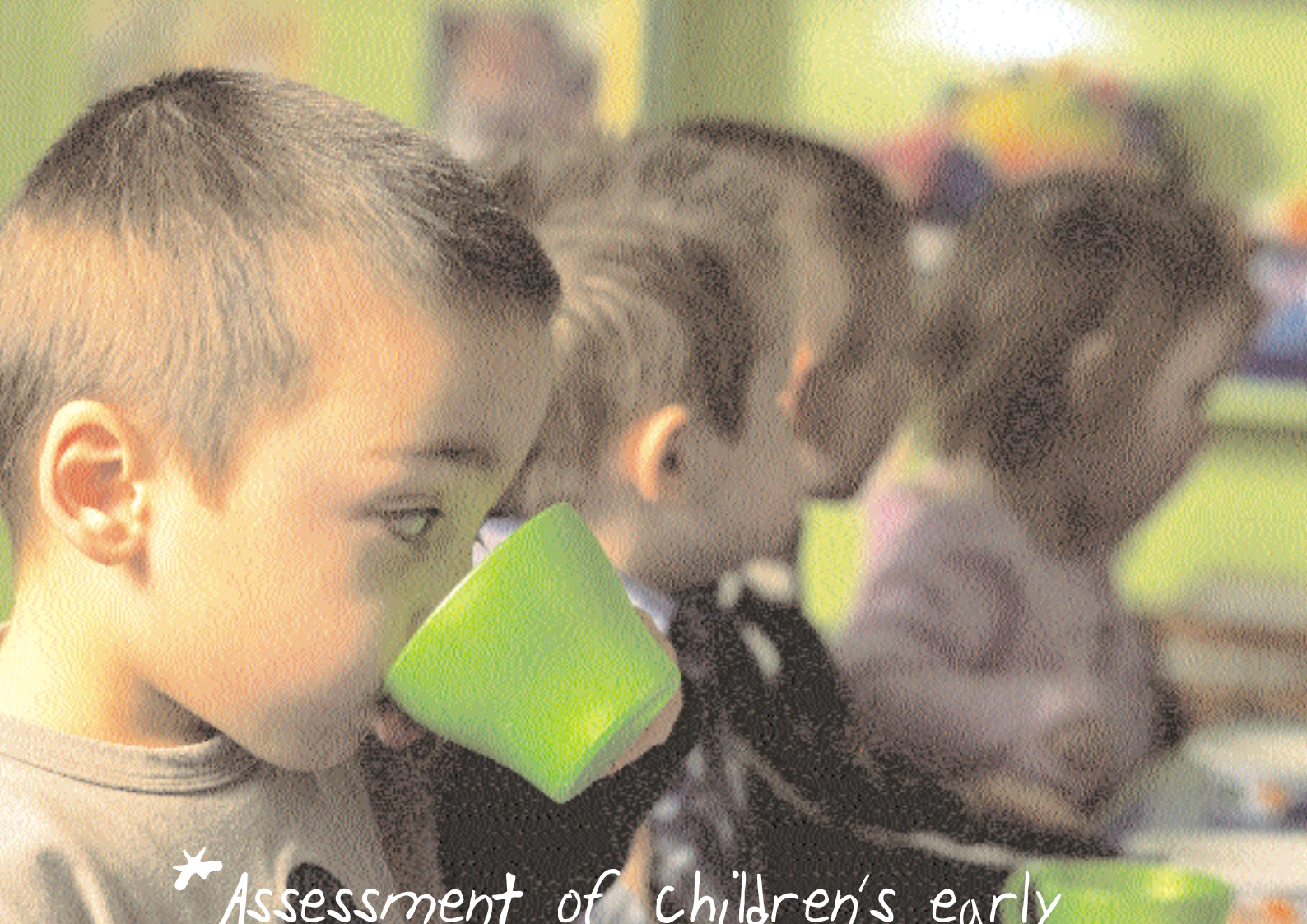
#### 3.8 Conclusion

Relationships and play are two central contexts for all children's early learning. The adult-child relationship, in particular is critical. The adult carefully scaffolds the child's learning so that he/she has exciting, fun and positive experiences through which new ideas and skills are developed, and new thinking emerges. Much of this learning occurs through play. Skilled and thoughtful intervention by the adult can enrich and extend children's play in ways that support all aspects of their learning and development. This is achieved through respectful, loving and caring relationships between the child and the adult. Both relationships and play are ideal contexts for supporting learning organised through the themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking.

#### Box 3.2: Contexts for learning – emerging key principles in this section

- Children learn through actions and interactions with others.
- The adult is central in supporting children to learn through quality interactions.
- Parents/guardians play a key role in supporting their children's early learning.
- Effective communication between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners enhances children's learning.
- Play is a powerful context for learning.
- Language is a major vehicle for learning.
- The play environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.





\* Assessment of children's early learning is integrated into the adult's daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.

\* Supporting early learning through the assessment process

- 4.1 Introduction to section four
- 4.2 The role of assessment
- 4.3 Functions of assessment
- 4.4 What to assess
- 4.5 Assessment for learning
- 4.6 Early identification of children with special educational needs
- 4.7 Keeping a record
- 4.8 Reflective practice
- 4.9 Reviewing and planning for learning
- 4.10 Conclusion

#### 4.1 Introduction to section four

This section highlights the valuable educational potential of assessment in supporting and extending early learning. It begins with an outline of the role and functions of assessment, and proceeds by exploring the importance of assessing learning in context. It identifies and discusses some of the primary sources of information on how well children are learning.

The section continues with a discussion on the importance of documenting assessment information. It then focuses on the role of assessment in identifying children with special educational needs and in planning for appropriate learning strategies and resources. The section includes an examination of the role of reflective practice in improving the quality of children's learning. In concluding, the section addresses the interlocking relationship between assessment and planning for learning.

#### 4.2 The role of assessment

Assessment in early childhood should primarily be informal, forming a routine part of day-to-day interactions and observations. Drummond's definition is helpful in capturing the essence of assessment in the early childhood setting. She sees assessment as being

the ways in which, in our everyday practice, we observe children's learning, strive to understand it, and then put our understanding to good use.

(1993, p.13)

This approach reflects not only how practitioners use assessment information, but also how parents/guardians and childminders naturally and instinctively use it in enhancing children's learning.

Identifying and monitoring learning forms an integral part of the dynamic process of planning for learning. In early childhood, we are primarily concerned with how the assessment process can lead us to a deeper level of understanding of learning from the perspective of a baby, toddler and young child. This deeper understanding better enables us to nurture and enhance learning in the early years through responding to children's changing abilities, interests and needs. Such an

approach results in an individually responsive curriculum. Future learning is facilitated and supported while past and present learning is celebrated, affirmed and praised.

#### FOCUS QUESTIONS

What are the benefits in assessing children's early learning?

What challenge(s), if any, does this assessment pose?

#### 4.3 Functions of assessment

Assessment can have formative, summative, evaluative, and diagnostic functions. It helps the adult to understand, appreciate and identify what the child is learning, the connections he/she is making while interacting with people, places and things, and the ways in which this learning is occurring. Each child's progress should be seen in terms of his/her previous learning, taking into account all the factors that might influence learning at a particular time.

Formative assessment is a continuous process that informs the next stages in children's learning, and this has considerable relevance in the early learning context. Summative assessment, or assessment of learning, is concerned with a more formal, cumulative record of the child's learning at different stages in his/her development. Assessment can also have an evaluative function, enabling practitioners to appraise the effectiveness or appropriateness of their practice. The diagnostic function of assessment is important in the early diagnosis of special educational needs, the identification of necessary resources and the formulation of suitable learning strategies. All of these functions can be accommodated in the context of 'assessment for learning'. The next subsections explore the functions of assessment in more detail.

#### 4.4 What to assess

In exploring what should be assessed, it is necessary to make the important assessable, rather than making the assessable important. Assessment practices in early childhood have often succumbed to downward pressure from later educational stages, both in the design and purpose of their tools and processes.

In this way, practices have often reflected a concentration on checklists and tick-boxes as a means of summarising and understanding a child's progress and achievement in learning. This approach is underpinned by a view that learning is linear and sequential, and fails to appreciate the complexity and dynamism of early learning.

The developmental milestones model is contentious in its presentation of developmental achievements by certain ages in a child's early life. Nonetheless, it is valuable in assisting the early identification of children with special educational needs. Adults therefore should be familiar with broad developmental milestones as general indicators of a child's development while exercising caution in the application of these. While close observation and monitoring are important, consideration should always be given to the individuality of each child. This individuality results in children arriving at developmental milestones in their own time and at their own pace. Such personal variations in development are to some extent influenced by individual learning dispositions and environmental factors.

Profiles such as those developed in the Curricular Guidelines for Good Practice for the Early Start Preschool Intervention Project (1998) can help to focus the adult's assessment observations and provide guidance in relation to starting points for planning strategies for learning. As this consultative document has already highlighted in section two, the Framework for Early Learning will support all aspects of the child's early learning and development. Assessment should further this learning and development across all four themes: well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. This thematic approach necessitates a shift in thinking about assessment. In early childhood, the traditional forms of assessment are not sensitive enough to yield a complete picture about children's real abilities. It is important that assessment focuses not simply on the knowledge constructed and discovered and the skills developed, but also on the dispositions nurtured and the attitudes developed. The child's plurilingual identity also needs to be considered. Assessment of all of these aspects of learning will create a more accurate picture of each child as a learner.

#### Learning in context

In assessing children's early learning, the adult attempts to understand learning from the child's perspective. In doing this, it is necessary for the adult to remember that each child lives in and learns from a particular social, cultural and physical environment. This environment has a significant impact on what the child learns and understands.

Awareness and consideration of the many different factors that influence what a child learns helps to avoid the risk of oversimplification. Understanding learning as a series of unrelated, isolated incidents does not appreciate the richness and intricacy of learning. This can in turn result in a lack of recognition for the actual learning being achieved by the young learner. It is therefore imperative that assessments are made over time and in the context of a wide range of meaningful learning opportunities.

As play and relationships are key contexts for learning (as detailed in section three), they offer valuable opportunities for the adult in supporting early learning through the process of assessment. Hayes (2003) asserts that while the child is making sense of the world through play, the adult can use play to make sense of the child's learning. She argues that this dual role for play

...allows for positive interactions between child and adult, but also allows for planning by the adult for future opportunities that might extend the child's own learning; it gives a role to the adult which takes the child as central.

(2003, p. 79)

#### 4.5 Assessment for learning

Assessment for learning is concerned with using the information gained through the various modes of assessment to extend and enhance the child's learning in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the young learner. The different functions of assessment need to be accommodated in as informal and as natural a way as possible.

Assessment for learning is best carried out in the context of a supportive, trusting, respectful and caring relationship between the adult and the child. This relationship better enables the adult



to observe the child, to talk meaningfully with the child, and to share purposefully in his/her learning. By interacting with the child in this way, the adult can support, gently challenge and draw out the child's ideas about activities and concepts, about situations and relationships between objects and people in the child's environment. Using these approaches the adult becomes adept at observing and noting critical moments where he/she can extend the child's learning through sensitive guidance and cooperation. Such shared activities should move towards empowering the child as a learner where 'the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In reflecting, the adult tries to understand what he/she is seeing and hearing. He/she then uses these insights to affirm the present learning and to plan for its progression in a positive direction that is meaningful to the young learner. In this way, assessment is an essential and natural part of the daily routine of adults working with children.

There are many different sources of information on the child's learning. It is through an eclectic combination of these that an accurate picture is created of each child's learning, showing the ways in which learning can be supported appropriately into the future. These sources include

- assessment by practitioners
- self-assessment (child's own assessment of learning)
- assessment by parents/guardians
- assessment by other professionals.

#### Practitioners

Carr (2001) suggests that a narrative approach (a story-telling approach) to assessment helps to identify and reflect more accurately the learning as experienced and displayed by the young learner. In her work in developing appropriate assessment strategies for use with children from birth, she looked for a way to 'find something that was part of enjoying the company of young children' (2001, p.x). Her narrative approach places learning in a particular social and cultural context, at a particular time and in the presence of particular people and objects. This makes it easier for the observed learning to be understood from the learner's perspective.

Narrative assessment requires the 'story of learning' to be known and understood. This

means that learning is seen as a process, evolving and changing over time. Judgements are therefore made over a prolonged period and in collaboration with the children and, where possible, with other adults. To understand the 'story of learning' the adult must observe, actively listen and talk with the child. The practitioner's experience and training assist him/her in structuring and deciding on what to document. This informed judgement, based on an understanding of children's general and particular learning needs, enables the adult to construct the learning stories and to use these to promote further learning.

A team effort helps to validate interpretations and co-construct the way forward. Where children attend settings outside the home, it is essential that parents/guardians are involved in this assessment. Making judgements in this way helps the adult to arrive at an in-depth understanding of how learning is actualised by the young learner. Assessment therefore should be a continuous, informal process.

#### Self-assessment

As children progress through early childhood, they become increasingly able to assess their own learning, to set their own goals, and to decide how to achieve these goals. They work hard to achieve goals such as throwing a ball accurately, communicating effectively, and forming letters and numbers. They show tremendous commitment and perseverance in working towards these goals.

The adult should enable children to play an increasingly active part in setting and pursuing their own learning goals. Care should be taken to ensure that these goals are achievable (with adult support) for the individual child. This is essential to maintain and strengthen a positive self-image and self-esteem. The children should also be encouraged to reflect on whether or not they have achieved their goals, and to understand that where a goal wasn't achieved, the effort made was important and should be commended. They should also be helped to plan the way forward with small steps.

The ability to think critically, to apply and adapt knowledge to new situations, and to be creative in problem-solving are essential for the child in today's world of change. Self-assessment can help to develop the child's ability to look at

information, to question, and to suggest a solution. These skills and abilities can be promoted and enhanced by engaging the child in the practice of self-assessment from an early age.

The child's self-assessment can often give insights into aspects of learning missed by the adult and can highlight for adults what children see as salient in relation to their learning. It can also inform the practitioner about what the child sees as being difficult, possibly giving an early indication of learning needs.

Very importantly, learning how to learn empowers children as learners. They develop a sense of control over their learning, understanding difficulties that might exist and seeing a possible way forward. This ultimately enhances their self-esteem and promotes independent learning.

#### Parents/guardians

One of the natural roles parents/guardians play is that of assessor. Most parents/guardians note every new achievement/success in their child's learning with pride and delight. Equally, they attend to and worry about achievements that they consider to be delayed. These are natural aspects of caring for and loving children.

When children attend settings outside the home, parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners have a joint role to play in the assessment process. An open, communicative relationship between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners facilitates the exchange of information about the child's progress and development. In this relationship, parents/guardians are respected as partners in the assessment process. They have a wealth of intimate information about their children's early learning which greatly enhances the childminder's/practitioner's picture of the children's learning and development. Equally, childminders/practitioners can share general and specific insights with parents/guardians on their children's progress. This two-way communication helps to ensure continuity and progression in learning as the children move between their home and their out-of-home settings. This sharing of observations strengthens the partnership between the early childhood setting and families, and thereby benefits the child.



**Other professionals**

All children are assessed at certain stages during their early years by adults other than their parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners. These assessments and screenings are generally carried out by professionals in the health sector. They focus on children's general development so that where delays or disabilities exist, the children may be given the appropriate support and care. This is dealt with in detail in the following sub-section.

**4.6 Early identification of children with special educational needs**

Adults have a responsibility to identify children whose learning is, or will be, compromised for any number of reasons. This early identification is vital so that children are given all the supports necessary to enable them to progress in their learning, to experience learning as an enjoyable and interesting process, and to minimise the potential impact of the delay/disability on subsequent learning and development.

Where there are concerns about potential difficulties experienced by children, diagnostic assessment and screening tools are useful. These help to identify learning needs that compromise early opportunities to establish relationships and to learn. Early detection by practitioners is an important part of the process in order to refer children where necessary. Where there is such a concern, further diagnostic assessment needs to be carried out by specialists in early intervention. This type of assessment, when used by experienced and skilled professionals, is helpful in identifying children who would benefit from additional support and attention in their early learning.

Assessment of children's learning provides the basis on which appropriate early intervention can be planned. One approach to early identification could involve initial assessment of the child's abilities, learning approaches and physical maturation, the identification of priority goals, and intervention through daily learning activities and ongoing evaluation. Specialised resources/equipment such as hearing aids, walking frames, or special seating equipment may be required. In this way, learning is enriched and is responsive to the specific needs and circumstances of each child.

Early intervention often involves people from many different professional backgrounds working together as part of a team, for example, an occupational therapist, a physiotherapist, a speech and language therapist, a psychologist, a nurse, a paediatrician, and a specialist teacher. While the child is the most important consideration in any intervention, the family also needs to be involved in the design of learning programmes. Having a good understanding of their child's needs and knowing what help is available enables parents/guardians to make decisions and communicate more effectively about their child. The management and provision of support services to children who learn Irish as a first language or who attend Irish-medium settings should reflect the children's spoken language.

Professional help is very necessary and is usually welcomed by parents/guardians of children with special educational needs, but dealing with a range of professionals can be stressful for the family. Finding a way to transcend professional boundaries and to exchange accurate and helpful information improves support to parents/guardians and can assist all involved in formulating an overall agreed plan for the child. Professionals can also make it easier for the family to give lasting help to the child by working through the family's established and preferred routines. A key worker model, such as that described by Barnardos (2000), supports parents/guardians in their attempts to integrate the services of individual professionals and to have a central role in planning and managing a learning programme.

An individual educational plan may be needed for some children with special educational needs. This is a comprehensive record of the child's learning needs, goals and progress that is developed by professionals and parents/guardians in partnership. It is concerned with the priority needs of the child, and the resources and learning approaches required to work towards meeting those needs. It is essential to nominate a key person within the team to co-ordinate and monitor the process.

**FOCUS QUESTION**

What strategies do you use to help children with special educational needs in realising their learning potential?

**4.7 Keeping a record**

While much assessment is spontaneous and unplanned, and often initiated by the young learner, it is important that key aspects of the information gleaned are documented. Parents/guardians tend to note their child's achievements such as the first smile, the first time to sit unaided, the first step, the first word, the drawing, the tune played on the drum and so forth. This information is very important, especially where developmental delays and/or disabilities are detected. The information details the child's developmental history which is important in understanding the challenges potentially facing the child and his/her family in the future, and in deciding how these can be addressed most appropriately.

Where children attend out-of-home settings, documenting assessment information is important and fulfils many purposes. Keeping a record can involve the practitioner and the child keeping a diary, portfolio or learning story together, with pictures and photographs, including digital photographs, augmenting or substituting for text in representing events and progress. Audio and video recordings can also be used to create a dynamic and user-friendly record.

The written, pictorial, and audio record serves as a celebration of the young learner's personal accomplishments, achievements, challenges and progress. It also provides the practitioner with a comprehensive 'picture' of each young learner's successes, abilities and progress which can be developed into a learning story. In this sense, the record provides the basis for planning for future learning and can also be used as an informal summative record. It is important to remember that the 'finished products' in children's learning will not tell the full story. The child's journey of learning is equally important and, in this respect, creating shared records shows this journey and actively encourages the child to evaluate progress and set future goals. It also demonstrates to the child the extent of the adult's interest in his/her learning.

Documentation enables the sharing of information and insights between practitioners and parents/guardians. In this way, co-decisions can be made regarding how learning can be supported and enhanced. At times, it may be necessary to share this information with other professionals when a child requires specialised support and assistance in order to progress learning. Keeping a record should be a dynamic part of the learning process focusing on documenting selected information in a format that is accessible, manageable and useful. In this way, it becomes a natural part of the practitioner's daily work and responsibility in out-of-home settings.

**4.8 Reflective practice**

Assessment benefits the adult as well as the child. It helps to illuminate areas of practice that could benefit from attention. In this way, practitioners are empowered to raise the quality of their work and, ultimately, the quality of children's learning. Evaluating practice is a cornerstone to this improvement of quality.

Evaluating practice is a continuous process and includes keeping abreast of current happenings, through ongoing professional development and reflecting on good practices, as advocated throughout early childhood literature. The reflective practitioner is continually engaged in determining the effectiveness of existing practices with a view to improving future practices and ultimately to improving learning from the child's perspective. Through analysis and discussion, practitioners as a group can identify areas where practice needs to be improved as well as recognising areas of strength. These areas can be used as the basis for focused attention and development to continually raise the quality of provision for children's learning. This process of promoting ongoing, professional activity directed at a constantly rolling cycle of evaluation and improvement is highly democratic and empowering, as the ability to influence change and improvement resides with the practitioner.

Documented assessments can provide the impetus for this reflection and ensuing review. In its Good Practice Self-assessment Manual (2000), the National Children's Nurseries Association presents self-assessment as a positive and rewarding educational activity, and looks at the process in terms of a learning experience for the adult.

The manual emphasises the developmental nature of self-assessment, so that the process is just as important as the outcomes or end results. Working successfully towards improving the quality of provision is very rewarding for the adult and highly beneficial for the child.

Likewise, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation in its Quality Improvement Programme, strongly advocates evaluation and reflection. It promotes a 'Quality Cycle' approach consisting of an ongoing cycle of evaluation, reflection, action planning and implementation. The ongoing, aspiring nature of this cycle becomes a spiral as it progresses, moving gradually onwards and upwards towards continual improvement.

Such reflective practice is to be encouraged and supported in the case of all those working in early childhood settings outside the home.

#### 4.9 Reviewing and planning for learning

One of the challenges for practitioners, childminders and parents/guardians alike is that of knowing how to put the information gathered through assessment to good use. This information is translated into plans to support future learning.

Assessment information serves many purposes, ranging from facilitating informal planning on how best to capture a child's attention through interesting and motivating experiences to the more formal purpose of diagnosing children with special educational needs. Barnardos (2000) recommends that all adults who work with children should be involved in the planning process, as this helps to develop a sense of ownership and ensures a consistent approach. The following list highlights some of the practical ways that assessment information might be used in reviewing and planning for learning.

- Use information on how a child relates socially with his/her peers to plan adult support for him/her in a group activity if needed, or to plan ways in which that child might help other children in the group.
- Use information to plan learning across all four themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking).
- Use information to explore and discuss with parents/guardians how projects/concepts/skills

being worked on in the out-of-home setting can be reinforced at home, and vice versa.

- Use information about a child's strengths to plan for activities that challenge the child generally and in particular areas of learning.
- Use informal information about a child's possible difficulties in a particular area to plan for more formal observation and recording of that child's learning.
- Use formal information on a child's area/areas of difficulty to plan long-term and short-term goals for meeting identified needs. Use the information to identify the types of support the child will need and how these will be made available to the child: human and material resources, the learning opportunities and experiences, and the intensity and level of adult support.
- Use information from observations of the child's interactions in the learning environment to review the physical environment and plan improvements in terms of amount of space, positioning and suitability of furniture, type and positioning of materials.
- Use information from a child's self-assessment to take account of what the child sees as important in his/her learning. Help the child review his/her progress so far and work out what his/her next short-term and long-term goals in a particular area of learning might be. Co-plan activities to help him/her meet those goals.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of how assessment information might, on a practical level, be used to enhance early learning for each child.

#### 4.10 Conclusion

Assessment provides the adult with the knowledge to recognise and celebrate progress, and to plan for and support the child's learning in the most appropriate manner. Continuous, informal assessment of the child through observing, listening, and talking, better enables the adult to plan experiences and activities which will nurture and encourage learning as an enjoyable process. Planning for learning through assessment should include all dimensions of the child's learning, and take account of individual interests and learning dispositions.

The context for learning is also an important factor, and information about the child's social, cultural and physical environment should be taken into consideration. The child himself/herself plays an active part, and parents/guardians have a central role in the whole planning process, as they have intimate information and knowledge about their child. The early identification of special educational needs, in all their diversity, is crucial. Assessment is essential in establishing individual needs, and it plays a central role in determining the supports and resources that are necessary to develop and deliver an appropriate learning programme.

#### Box 4.1: Supporting early learning through the assessment process – emerging key principles in this section

- Assessment of children's early learning is integrated into the adult's daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.
- Assessment celebrates the child's progress and achievements, and enables the adult to plan for enhanced learning building on the child's strengths and meeting his/her needs.
- Assessment facilitates the early identification of children with special educational needs, enabling planning for necessary resources and appropriate approaches to support learning.
- Children should be actively involved in assessing their own learning and setting their own goals, empowering them as confident, capable, life-long learners.
- Parents/guardians have valuable insights and information about their child that are important aspects in the creation of a whole picture of the child's development and learning.
- Reflective practice and assessment go hand-in-hand, and together provide a mechanism through which the partners in the learning process benefit.







\* The play environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.

\* Building the framework



5.1 Introduction to section five
5.2 Influences on a national framework
5.3 The Framework for Early Learning - the proposed model
5.4 Components of the framework
5.5 Exemplifying the model
5.6 Conclusion

### 5.1 Introduction to section five

The section begins by identifying some of the factors that might influence a national framework for early learning. Drawing on both international and national frameworks, it proposes a possible model for the Framework for Early Learning. The proposed model has been designed and presented as a means of focusing the consultation process planned by the NCCA to accompany the launch of this consultative document. The ultimate nature and design of the framework will emerge following this consultation and subsequent work directed by the NCCA.

### 5.2 Influences on a national framework

There are many factors which influence the types of early learning experiences children have (Bredenkamp, Knuth, Kunesh, and Shulman, 1992; Hayes, 1999). The choices we make for children have a profound impact on their experiences of childhood and on their experiences later in life. These choices emerge from societal beliefs about what children should learn, how they should learn, and where they should learn. These beliefs and values may vary quite a lot within society, depending on the socio-cultural, political, and philosophical contexts. New insights from research in areas such as education, health, psychology, and neuroscience further influence us by enhancing our knowledge and understanding of early learning. Children's learning experiences will also be dependent on the actual setting in which they spend their time, as well as on the people with whom they interact.

The Framework for Early Learning will understandably be informed by this diversity in ideas and practices. This will mean that the framework will be descriptive rather than prescriptive, reflecting the uniqueness of each child, as well as the diverse nature of early childhood in Ireland. This should ensure all learning continues to be negotiated between the child and the adult in the context of a trusting, respectful and caring relationship, while being supported and informed by a national framework.

### 5.3 The Framework for Early Learning – the proposed model

Subsections 5.3 - 5.5 present the NCCA's proposed model for the Framework for Early Learning. This model has been implicit

throughout this document and reflects a particular understanding of children as young learners, as well as the role of the adult in supporting and extending their learning. The model represents a possible approach for the development of the framework. It is not complete and requires much development. However, it is hoped that its inclusion in this consultative document will enhance the accompanying consultation process, which paves the way for the beginning of the development work on the framework itself.

#### The philosophical and value base of the framework

The emerging key principles, as they are currently articulated in earlier sections of this document, are a start in providing the framework with a philosophical and value base.

Among the principles that have been identified thus far is the belief that each child is unique and is a capable and competent learner. Section two in particular outlines the importance of this uniqueness for determining the types of learning experiences that will best support and extend each child's learning. This includes the nature and level of adult support the child may require to experience learning as a fun, positive and meaningful experience.

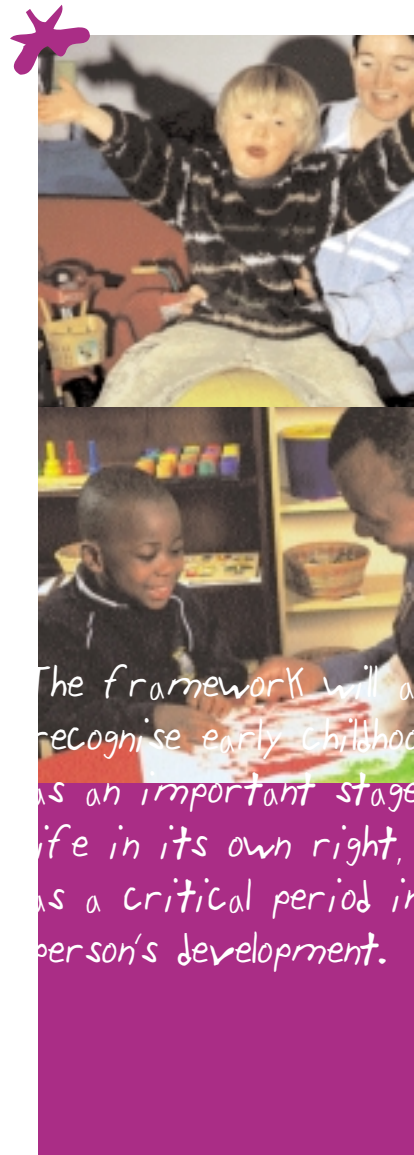
The framework will also recognise early childhood as an important stage in life in its own right, and as a critical period in a person's development. By prioritising the social and cultural nature of early learning, and the crucial role that language plays, it can emphasise the importance of children learning with and from other children and adults. The principles also highlight the important role children themselves play in shaping and directing learning which is personally appealing, motivating and relevant, as well as the need for informed adult support. The principles also represent a commitment to children of all abilities, cultures, languages, faiths, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds.

### 5.4 Components of the framework

A number of suggested components for the framework are outlined. These should elucidate how the framework could be of use and relevance to all those in the early childhood sector.

#### The framework should

- present the **vision** of children as early learners upon which it is based
- articulate its **philosophical and value base** and its **aims**
- present the **principles** which underpin how children's early learning should be supported in a manner which respects how they learn, and the importance of that learning
- outline **learning through the four themes** discussed in section two (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking)
- present a set of **aims** within each of the four themes
- present **learning goals** within each aim
- identify and describe a range of **learning experiences** that could be used to achieve these goals, taking account of children's different abilities, cultures, languages, faiths, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds
- include **exemplars** (or case studies) of good practices in supporting early learning, which reflect the diversity of Irish early childhood care and education (for example, diversity of setting, age of child, philosophy, and pedagogical approach)
- outline **interaction styles/methodologies** for parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in supporting early learning
- promote the importance of **partnerships with parents/guardians** in supporting children's learning in out-of-home settings and/or where children are supported by **other professionals** including therapists
- advise how parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners can support each other in using **assessment** for the benefit of individual children
- promote **reflective practice** (by practitioners) which empowers the adult in his/her role as educator, but also as learner
- provide practical advice on **planning** (by the practitioner) for early learning so that children's strengths as well as their needs shape the experiences they are offered.



The framework will a  
recognise early childhood  
as an important stage  
life in its own right,  
as a critical period in  
person's development.

This consultative document has already presented some of these components in sections one to four. Section one presented the aims of the framework, while sections one and two described the broad philosophical base. Section two presented early learning as an integrated process and described the four themes being proposed. Section three demonstrated the centrality of relationships and play as contexts for learning. Section four discussed the role of assessment in supporting children's learning.

Frameworks developed in both Ireland and in other jurisdictions show many similarities with the model proposed in this document. For example, Te Whariki (1996), the New Zealand framework mentioned earlier, is grounded in a set of principles, and presents learning through strands, goals and broad learning outcomes for children from birth to school age (generally five years). The Swedish Curriculum for the pre-school (1998) (children aged from one to six years) likewise outlines learning through goals. Guidelines inform practitioners in working towards these goals. The Primary School Curriculum (1999a) presents learning through principles, curriculum areas and enabling objectives. It advises on appropriate approaches and methodologies to be used by the teacher to support children in their learning. It endorses the view that the teacher is central in planning and providing learning experiences which suit each child.

Within the framework of the curriculum schools are afforded flexibility to plan a programme that is appropriate to the individual schools' circumstances and to the needs, aptitudes and interests of the children.

(Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum, 1999a, p.11)

### FOCUS QUESTIONS

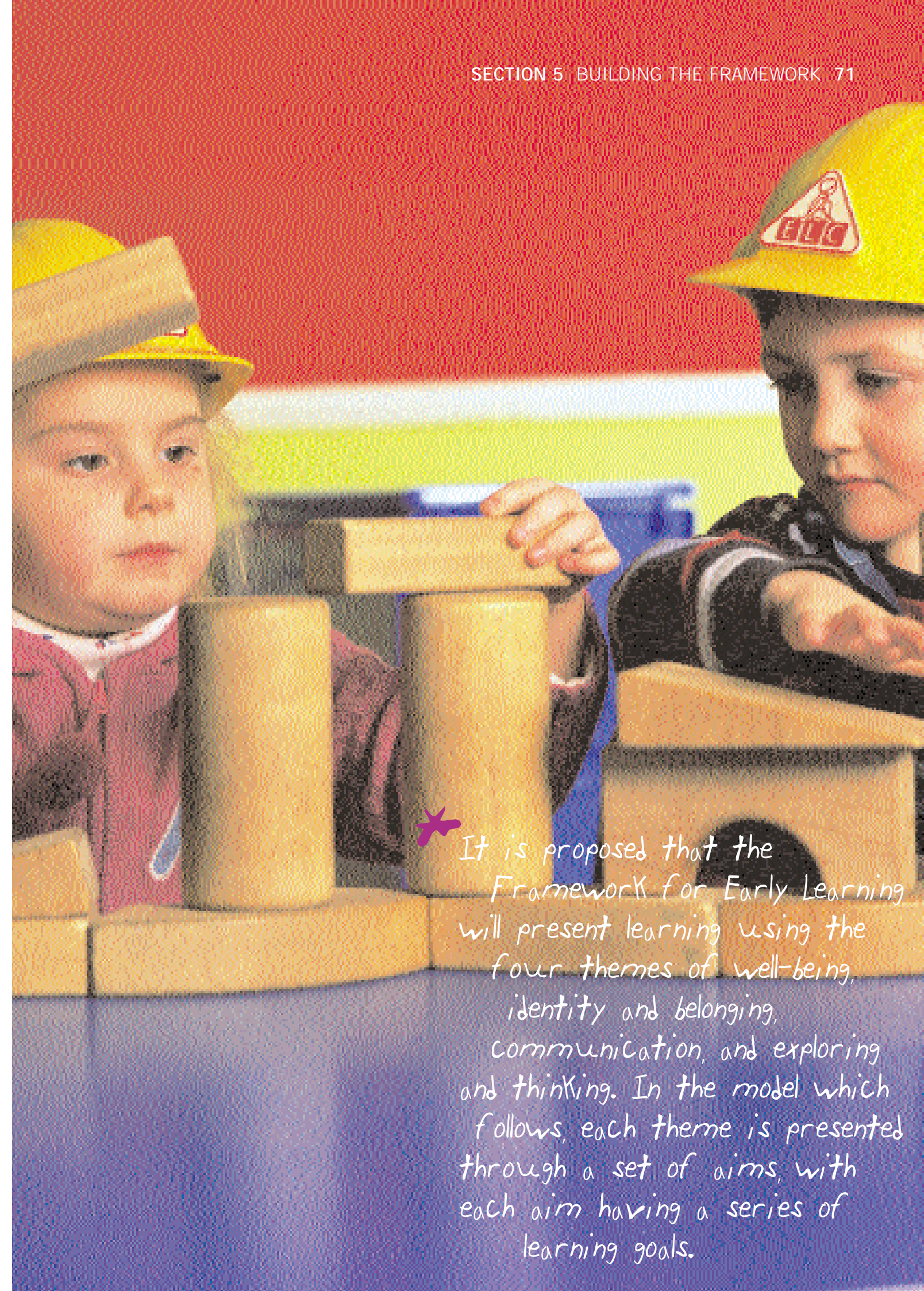
Do you think the proposed components could help you in providing appropriate learning experiences for all children in your setting?

What additional types of guidance, if any, would you find useful in the framework?

### 5.5 Exemplifying the model

It is proposed that the Framework for Early Learning will present learning using the four themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. In the model which follows, each theme is presented through a set of aims, with each aim having a series of learning goals. Suggestions for learning experiences to assist the child in working towards these goals are also given. Some exemplars (case studies) of good practices in early learning are included. These exemplars are based on the principles articulated in this consultative document, and demonstrate ways in which the adult can support the child's learning.

It is hoped that the consultation process will generate valuable feedback in relation to the usefulness of the themes being proposed, as well as the way in which each theme is presented in the pages that follow using aims, goals and learning experiences. The consultation may also generate other ideas on improving the proposed model, including other examples of learning experiences and exemplars.



It is proposed that the Framework for Early Learning will present learning using the four themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. In the model which follows, each theme is presented through a set of aims, with each aim having a series of learning goals.



**Aims**

The child's physical, emotional and intellectual well-being is nurtured within the context of warm and supportive relationships with others.

Children should learn in comfortable and safe surroundings where

- their emotional and intellectual well-being are nurtured
- their physical well-being and health are nurtured
- they feel safe and secure
- their moral and spiritual well-being is nurtured
- they can learn in a positive, and enjoyable way
- they are valued and affirmed as individuals, as learners and as group members.

The following sample demonstrates how these aims could be developed in the framework.



Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards the goals and aim outlined above. The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn

**Sample Aim**

Children learn in comfortable and safe surroundings where their physical well-being and health are nurtured.

**Goals**

The adult should support the child to:

- develop an awareness of his/her body, its functions and changing capabilities
- gain increasing control and co-ordination of body movements
- explore, discover, and experiment with his/her physical skills
- refine his/her physical skills through challenging and pleasurable experiences
- develop self-help skills in caring for his/her own body with regard to hygiene, nourishment, and routines such as resting, washing and dressing
- make healthy choices and develop positive attitudes about nutrition, hygiene, and routines.

**Learning experiences**

Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards the goals and aim outlined above. The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn from their experiences will vary accordingly.

**Babies**

Babies explore objects in a multi-sensorial way – through taste, touch, smell, hearing and sight. Through the careful choice of objects, the baby not only learns sensorially, but also strengthens the muscles of the hand and gains increasing control and co-ordination of body movements.

The baby develops a growing understanding of his/her physical capabilities by being encouraged to imitate adult actions such as clapping hands, nodding, smiling, and waving.

**Toddlers**

The toddler has opportunities to physically interact with objects such as kicking a ball, carrying and throwing toys, gathering fallen leaves, pouring water and building sandcastles.

The toddler has opportunities to express preferences for different types of food, while being encouraged to develop an awareness of healthy eating.

**Young children**

The young child has opportunities to develop gross and fine motor skills, for example, catching, balancing, bouncing a ball, making marks, scribbling, drawing and threading.

Support is given to the young child to refine self-help and self-care skills during routines such as eating, drinking, toileting, resting, washing and dressing.

**Exemplar**

**Age group: Young children**

Liz is a childminder who has a fenced-in play area outside her house. She sets up a slide for the children to have fun and experience in climbing and sliding.

Liz encourages the children to take turns on the slide, supporting them in learning the importance of sharing. She keeps a close watch to ensure that each child is included in the play, and that he/she has opportunities to explore and develop the skills of climbing and sliding. Listening intently, she learns how the younger children justify their immediate re-appearance at the top of the queue for the slide with 'It's my turn because I want to...' To her surprise, this behaviour is tolerated by the older children.

Following many opportunities to climb the steps and slide down the slide, the children begin to introduce new and exciting challenges for themselves. With Liz's encouragement, and

physical support for some children, they climb up on the slide itself, and slide down on their tummies. The steepness of the climb brings a new sense of adventure to the play.

Seán, one of the younger children, experiences difficulty pulling himself up along the slide without the help of the steps. Knowing this from conversations with his dad and observing this first-hand, Liz holds his hand to support him in his climb to the top of the slide. Seán delights in his arrival at the top. He shouts with joy as he lets go and whizzes his way to the bottom to begin the adventure once again.

The children continue their play for another while, shouting words such as 'up,' 'down,' 'faster,' 'higher' 'steep,' and 'slippy' as they climb up and slide down. Liz gently introduces new words to the group to help them talk about their actions, and to express their feelings.

**Some principles which are supported by this exemplar.**

- Assessment of children's early learning is integrated into the adult's daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.
- Parents/guardians have valuable insights and information about their child that are important aspects in the creation of a whole picture of the child's development.
- Play is a powerful context for learning.



**Aims**

Strong feelings of identity and belonging contribute to inner well-being and security.

Children should feel that they have a place within a community where

- they feel accepted and affirmed and where their diverse needs are catered for
- they can make and express choices
- they can plan co-operatively, take turns, and share resources
- they are encouraged to learn with and alongside others
- links with the family and the wider world are affirmed and extended
- they can identify and feel comfortable with routines, customs and regular events
- symbols and representations of their own culture are promoted and respected.

The following sample demonstrates how these aims could be developed in the framework.

**Sample Aim**

Children should feel that they have a place within a community where they can identify and feel comfortable with routines, customs, and regular events.

**Goals**

- The adult should support the child to
- become confident and self-assured through daily routines within close and trusting relationships
  - become aware of and respect the needs and feelings of others in their behaviour, and understand the limits and boundaries of acceptable behaviour
- develop positive attitudes towards others whose gender, language, faith or culture, for example, is different from his/her own relationships
  - become aware that the celebration of cultural and religious festivals is important in people's lives.

**Learning experiences**

Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards the goals and aim outlined. The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn from their experiences will vary accordingly.

**Babies**

The learning programme includes familiar rhymes and songs. Babies have a personal place and personal artefacts. They are encouraged to play independently with these artefacts.

Babies enjoy a sense of routine and familiarity with both the people and objects in their environment. It is comforting for them to hear familiar sounds and to have their caregiver near.

**Toddlers**

Toddlers have opportunities to listen to and sing along with others, and to make their own contribution to the day's activities.

Toddlers have opportunities to play with other toddlers whose language and culture are different

from their own. They learn to develop positive attitudes to difference, and to appreciate their own distinctive culture.

**Young children**

Young children talk about themselves, their home, their family and friends, and other items and events that interest them. They learn to listen to other children expressing their interests.

Young children have opportunities to learn about cultural and religious festivals. This helps them to become aware of the beliefs and traditions of their own family, and the way of life of others in their community.



Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards goals and aim outlined.

The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn from their experiences will vary accordingly.

**Exemplar**

**Age group: Babies**

Alyssa is fourteen months old. She is babbling contentedly to herself as she explores some cardboard tubes and experiments with dropping her bricks into the tubes. Her mother is nearby labelling some new photographs and placing them in the album. Alyssa, noticing her mother's actions, crawls towards her mother and expresses an interest in seeing the photographs.

Her mother helps her onto her knee and together they look at the photographs, most of which show Alyssa with her mother and Sam the dog. Her mother points to Alyssa, herself, and Sam, repeating the names as she does so. Alyssa in turn points at the various faces. Watching and interpreting Alyssa's facial expressions, her body movements, and her attempts at words, her mother questions and talks to Alyssa about the people in the photographs – their faces and what

they are doing. Alyssa delights in seeing herself in the photographs and claps her hands to express excitement and joy at seeing her own image. (This excitement is evident in many other instances, including when Alyssa sees herself in a mirror and her reflection in a window). She moves her attention from one photograph to another as she turns the pages of the album, and babbles while pointing to each photo. In seeing Alyssa's reaction, her mother chooses some photographs and proceeds to make a simple collection of photographs for Alyssa to 'play' with. These form part of the 'reading' material Alyssa shares with her mother in the coming week. Conversations and stories based on the occasions/events in the photos emerge as they look through the photographs, and talk about them during their routines.

**Some principles which are supported by this exemplar.**

- The child learns within the context of warm and supportive attachments and relationships which encourage interaction, exploration and communication.
- Language is a major vehicle for learning.
- Each child should develop a positive self-image and strong sense of self-esteem.
- Parents/guardians play a key role in supporting their children's early learning.
- Assessment of children's early learning is integrated into the adult's daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.



**Aims**

The child’s ability to communicate is at the very heart of early learning and development.

Children should be enabled to develop the ability to communicate in comfortable and safe surroundings where

- they develop and use non-verbal communication skills
- they develop and use language for a variety of purposes
- they make sense of their own experiences through language
- they develop respect for and understanding of communication by others
- they broaden their understanding of the world through language they see and experience, and use language in its symbolic form
- they can express themselves creatively and imaginatively through media such as paint, dance, and music as well as language.

The following sample demonstrates how these aims could be developed in the framework.

**Sample Aim**  
Children should be enabled to develop the ability to communicate in comfortable and safe surroundings where they develop and use language for a variety of purposes.

<b>Goals</b>	
The adult should support the child to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- become a socially competent language user in a range of contexts such as play, and day-to-day routines</li> <li>- use language with increasing confidence</li> <li>- develop and extend vocabulary</li> <li>- develop listening and responding skills</li> <li>- develop his/her use of language in an</li> </ul>	increasingly sophisticated manner such as naming, asking, describing, planning, story-telling, predicting, recounting and sequencing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- become a proficient user of at least one language, while developing an increasing awareness and appreciation of other languages</li> <li>- use language in a fun, creative and playful way through the use of conversation, rhyme, story, song and nonsense words.</li> </ul>

**Learning experiences**  
Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards the goals and aim outlined above. The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn from their experiences will vary accordingly.

<p><b>Babies</b> The baby learns to use sounds to convey messages and share meanings, for example, when he/she is hungry, happy, or wants an object. The adult supports this learning by responding appropriately and consistently.</p> <p>The baby develops his/her use of language by listening, imitating and engaging in meaningful ‘communicative exchanges’ with adults. For example, the adult adds the name to the object that is the baby’s point of reference and later extends the vocabulary to enrich the meaning – ‘ball’ becomes ‘big blue ball’. In this way, he/she conveys the power of words to specify meaning.</p> <p><b>Toddlers</b> The adult extends the toddler’s use of language by responding to his/her words and phrases, by introducing new words in meaningful contexts,</p>	<p>and by initiating interesting conversations.</p> <p>The toddler expands and enriches his/her vocabulary through talking with others, and telling and listening to stories.</p> <p><b>Young children</b> The young child learns to use his/her language in increasingly complex ways through opportunities, to narrate, to sequence, to plan, to predict and to reason. He/she gains wider experience of the second language, naming objects of interest and learning some simple phrases and songs.</p> <p>The young child becomes increasingly aware of language in print. The adult helps the child develop an understanding of the meaning and messages conveyed through print by experiencing and exploring print in books, posters, signs, menus and labels.</p>
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**Exemplar**

**Age group: Young children**

Declan, the infant teacher is reading the story ‘The Three Little Pigs’ to his group of twenty-three four and five year old children. The group visited a farm the day before and was particularly excited by the pigs. Noting their interest, Declan plans language, music, visual arts, drama and science activities based on the theme of pigs. He chooses the story ‘The Three Little Pigs’ as the context within which to begin the work.

Declan uses a ‘big’ story book so that all the children can see the illustrations and the words. As he reads, he asks many open-ended questions encouraging the children to understand the reasons for the pigs/wolf’s actions, to assist them in taking the perspective of the pigs/wolf, and to encourage them to speculate about alternative actions for the pigs/wolf. These questions are both individual and group orientated, supporting the children in developing their thinking and problem-solving skills, and helping them to use language for a variety of purposes.

In the following days, the children retell the story along with Declan, and on their own, using finger puppets as prompts. They also use pictures from the book to help them to sequence the story. A child who is shy to speak out in the group is supported by Declan in taking responsibility for sequencing the story for other children, using the prompts. This helps to build the child’s confidence and to give the child a rich language

experience. With each retelling of the story, the children take more and more of the lead until they are able to tell the story without any help from their teacher. Some children create sound effects and compose songs for the story, using objects and musical instruments from around the classroom.

Other children make models of the pigs’ houses using marla, straw, twigs, and pebbles. They feel, smell, and describe the materials they are using. They devise ways to test these houses for strength and waterproofing (science). Throughout all this work, Declan carefully structures conversations with individual children and with small groups about the work in progress and the children’s intentions, in order to extend their thinking, to encourage them to learn from each other, and to develop their expressive language. Through planned and purposeful interactions with the children, he assists them in reasoning and in justifying, in speculating and in hypothesising as they develop their thinking skills. Declan observes them as they do this, noting the social interaction of the children, their use of language and their sequencing skills. He uses this information to plan further learning opportunities for the children. The children are also encouraged to tell the story to their parents/guardians at home, and to describe their related activities. The parents/guardians further familiarise themselves with the children’s work when they visit the classroom.

**Some principles which are supported by this exemplar.**

- Children are active learners, making sense of their environments through the senses, movement and language.
- Children learn through actions and interactions with others.
- Language is a major vehicle for learning.
- The adult is central in supporting children to learn through quality interactions.
- Assessment celebrates the child’s progress and achievements, and enables the adult to plan for enhanced learning building on the child’s strengths and meeting his/her needs.

**Aims**

The child explores and makes sense of his/her environment in a multi-sensorial way. Through active exploration, the child has opportunities to develop in many different ways, including cognitively and physically.

The child should have opportunities to

- use senses and movement to make connections and recognise patterns
- develop the skill of observation using the senses
- become playfully involved in investigating and finding out about the environment
- develop creative and imaginative skills
- develop an appreciation of the natural beauty and wonder of creation
- develop physically in interacting with the environment
- refine and develop more elaborate ways of thinking, exploring, and understanding
- explore and use symbols and marks to make and represent meaning.

The following sample demonstrates how these aims could be developed in the framework.

**Sample Aim**

The child should have opportunities to use senses and movement to make connections and recognise patterns.

**Goals**

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <p>The adult should support the child to</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- recognise objects by sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste</li> <li>- ask questions, experiment, design, make and solve problems</li> <li>- recognise patterns, shapes, and colours in the environment</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- sort and categorise into groups</li> <li>- understand some properties of materials, for example, soft/hard</li> <li>- develop an understanding of measure, and an awareness of words to describe measure (time, capacity, volume, weight, length, money).</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

**Learning experiences**

Learning experiences such as these can help in working towards the goals and aim outlined above. The needs of children are diverse and varied and the level of adult assistance they require in order to participate and learn from their experiences will vary accordingly.

**Babies**

Young babies are adept at making connections and recognising patterns from a very early stage, for example, the shape of the face and the sound of the human voice, and they soon associate one with the other. The baby listens to the human voice and explores his/her own capacity to reproduce sound in response.

The baby's capacity to learn through the senses and his/her growing strength and mobility lead to pleasurable activities such as using water, textured materials, music and musical instruments, along with messy play opportunities. These experiences lay the foundations for more formal learning with this material at a later stage.

**Toddlers**

Toddlers explore how things work and how things affect each other, for example, rolling a ball to

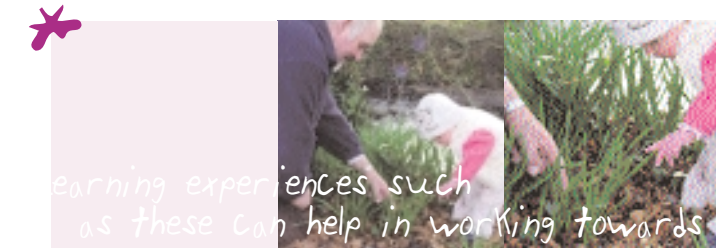
knock skittles.

Toddlers learn by matching, sorting and classifying, for example, sorting and counting fallen leaves into groups by colour and by size.

**Young children**

Young children engage with real objects, and construct working theories about how these objects work and how they can be manipulated. For example, they investigate the effects of water on plastic bottles, stones, kitchen paper, and cork. They discover how heat affects materials such as chocolate, bread, metal, and water.

Young children learn by comparing the length of time certain tasks take, for example, walking to the shop versus going there by car, filling a basin with water using cups, jugs, saucepans, and so on.



**Exemplar**

**Age group: Toddlers**

Vivienne works in a crèche. She takes the toddler class out to the garden. The children have their coats and scarves on. Some of the toddlers dig with their spades in the earth. 'Wet!' says Eve. 'Sticky!' shouts Mary. 'My dad said he could hear the rain all night last night,' exclaims Jack. On overhearing the conversation developing, and on the children's invitation, Vivienne joins the group in their digging. She poses questions about why the earth is so sticky and what this might mean for all the little creatures living in it. The children share their thoughts and theories with her. Vivienne responds imparting some information about how some creatures cope with these conditions. The children continue their conversation questioning the validity of Vivienne's information.

In another group, Jack picks up a worm with his two hands and puts it in his bucket. He spends time watching it wriggle, and proceeds to show it to his friends as he explains how it moves. At the sand and water table, which is placed at the top of the garden, Vivienne notes Jason's concentration and absorption as he pours water from a full plastic watering can into a red plastic

saucepan. He is very pleased with himself as he doesn't spill any of it. When he finishes he pours the water back into the watering can. 'It's full again!' he shouts and proceeds to pour the water into the saucepan again. Vivienne extends Jason's play by making more containers (of different sizes and shapes) available to him. Gradually, he refines his skill of pouring and filling.

Siobhán comes over to the sand and water table, and pours sand into a sieve. She holds up the sieve and shakes it to make the sand drop through. She repeats this activity over and over. Vivienne notes that Katie is watching Siobhán's sand-pouring activity with interest. She knows that Katie will need some physical help in order to participate. Vivienne brings another sieve over to the sand table and begins to sieve side-by-side with Siobhán. Eventually, Katie approaches the table and indicates that she would like a try. Together, Vivienne and Katie sieve and talk about the sand falling. Both Katie and Siobhán are completely immersed in their tasks and show no desire to go inside twenty minutes later, when Vivienne suggests they wash their hands in preparation for snack time.

**Some principles which are supported by this exemplar.**

- The play environment—whether outdoor or indoor—warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.
- Play is a powerful context for learning.
- The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity, and fairness has positive life-long implications.
- Assessment of children's early learning is integrated into the adult's daily observations of, and interactions with, the child.
- Each child is unique, developing and learning at different rates. Learning should be meaningful and relevant and linked to the child's interests, strengths, and life experiences.



### FOCUS QUESTIONS

The proposed model for the framework presents learning through four themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking). Each theme has a number of aims, goals, suggested learning experiences and an exemplar of learning.

How useful do you think this model would be in helping you to support all children's learning?

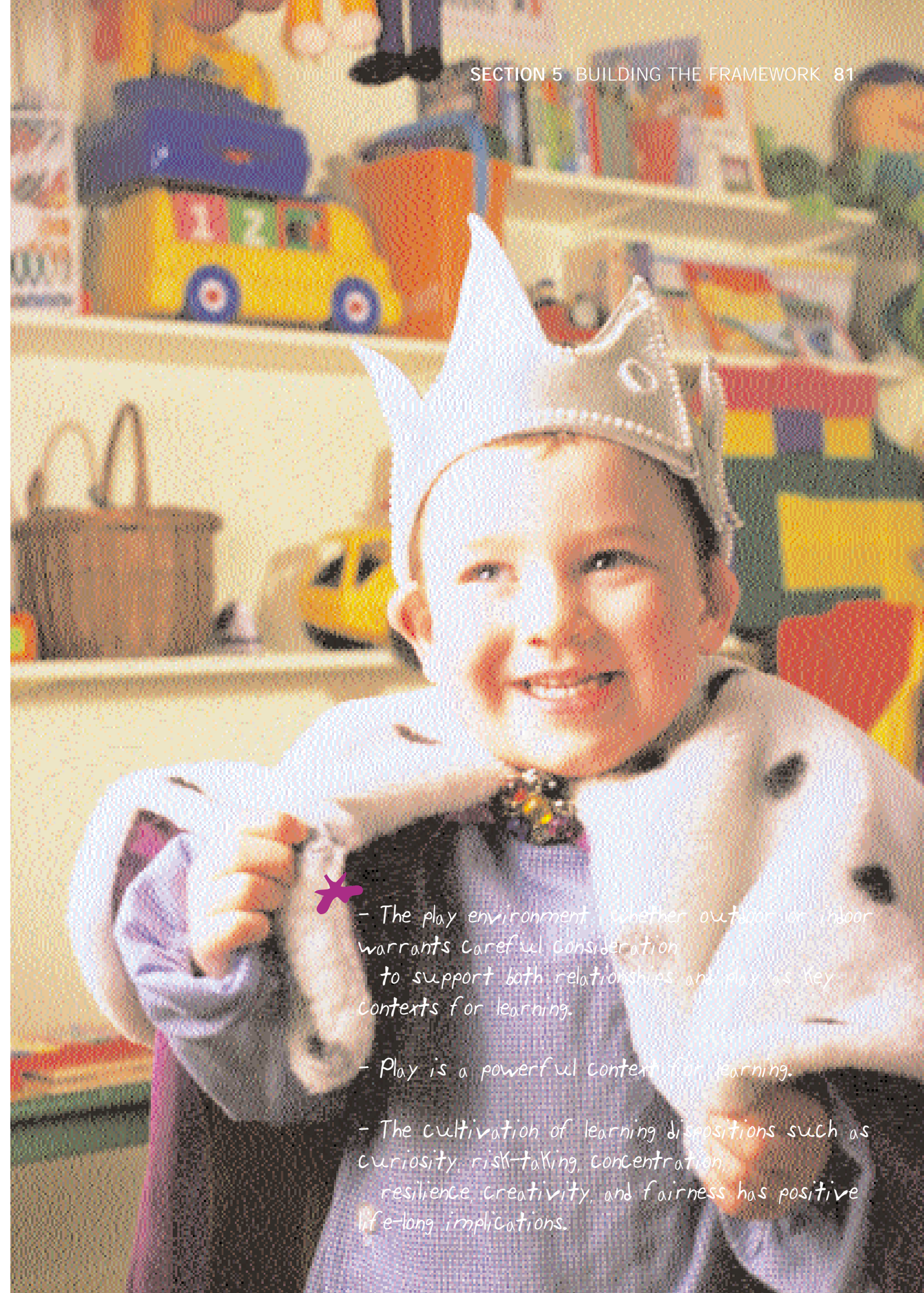
What change(s), if any, would you make to this model?

### 5.6 Conclusion

The launch of this consultative document represents a unique opportunity to develop a national framework to support and enhance early learning for all children throughout the whole early childhood period in this country.

This section offers a proposed model for the Framework for Early Learning. The model that will eventually be used for the framework will be determined by the consultation process and will inform the subsequent work which will be undertaken under the direction of the NCCA. The proposed model is presented here to help focus discussions during the accompanying consultation process. Rather than using developmental domains or areas of learning, the model presents early learning holistically using four themes. It emphasises the importance of the learning process, and prioritises the role of the adult in ensuring that learning experiences cater for the uniqueness of the child.

The next section outlines plans for the consultation process, which will support the development of the framework itself.



- \* - The play environment, whether outdoor or indoor warrants careful consideration to support both relationships and play as key contexts for learning.
- Play is a powerful context for learning.
- The cultivation of learning dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, resilience, creativity, and fairness has positive life-long implications.



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All aspects of early learning are interconnected: children should experience a broad and balanced range of learning experiences where all dimensions of development are equally important and interwoven.

\* Concluding remarks



**Consultation and partnership**

Developing the Framework for Early Learning presents opportunities to build a shared understanding of how all children from birth to six years can be supported effectively in their learning. Consultation and partnership lie at the heart of this work.

The NCCA undertakes its work in close partnership with the stakeholders in education. As indicated in the introduction to this document, consultation will be central to the development of the Framework for Early Learning.

The framework will be developed in partnership with the early childhood sector, including

- parents/guardians
- childminders
- practitioners
- representatives of relevant government departments
- other professionals in early childhood care and education and related disciplines.

This partnership will

- help create public awareness of the importance of early childhood as a time of tremendous personal development and learning, and of the influence of this on all subsequent learning
- help create a more interactive culture between parents/guardians, childminders, practitioners, other relevant professionals and national policy-makers, as well as between theory and practice
- highlight and promote discussion on the key ideas which have been presented in this consultative document
- enable the NCCA to engage with and draw on the range of practices, views and expertise in the early childhood sector, as well as international experiences

- help ensure that the Framework for Early Learning supports adults in their endeavours to constantly improve their practices for the benefit of all children.

The NCCA will use the following consultative strategies to work with the early childhood sector.

**1. The consultative document: Towards a Framework for Early Learning**

This current document was developed following much research in the area of early learning, together with an analysis of curriculum guidance used both in Ireland and internationally. It reflects contemporary thinking and draws on practices here in Ireland. The NCCA has significant experience in the area of early childhood curriculum development, having engaged in an extensive review and revision of the infant curriculum during the 1990s. It collaborated closely with the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) during the writing of this document. It was also assisted by leading academics in Ireland in the field of early learning, as well as health professionals and practitioners working with children from birth to six years in a range of settings. In this way, the document provides a solid base for the NCCA to work in partnership with the sector in developing the framework.

The document contains a number of focus questions to help readers reflect on some of the key ideas presented. It is hoped that readers will share their thoughts on these ideas with the NCCA. This will be facilitated through a number of strategies including

- **response forms** (available at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie), and in hard copy).
- **regional seminars** organised and hosted by the NCCA. These will include a presentation on the current document, Towards a Framework for Early Learning and provide opportunities to discuss its key ideas.
- **briefings**. The NCCA, on invitation, will present to organisations, agencies, bodies and networks working in the early childhood sector. As with the regional seminars, these will include a presentation on the document with opportunities for discussion.

- **written submissions**. The NCCA will invite early childhood organisations, agencies, bodies and networks to present in detail their responses to the key ideas contained in this consultative document.

- **portraits**. ‘Portraits’ will be created in a small number of early childhood settings. Through observations and discussions, the NCCA will document and interpret the work of childminders and practitioners in supporting children’s learning. This will enable the NCCA to explore how a theme based framework can support existing good practices.

Information gleaned through these strategies will greatly assist the NCCA in progressing the development of the framework.

**2. Invitational seminar**

The NCCA will organise an invitational seminar to be held in autumn 2004. This will provide an opportunity to inform the early childhood sector of the outcomes of the consultation process. These findings will be presented in a report to be launched at the seminar. This report will note, where necessary, areas for further attention, and outline a revised plan of how the framework might be structured, presented, and developed. The seminar may include inputs from experts in the field of early learning invited to speak on ideas central to the development of the framework.

**3. Early Childhood Committee**

The NCCA has established an Early Childhood Committee. This committee is representative of the private, public, and voluntary early childhood sectors. It will support the NCCA in developing the Framework for Early Learning.

In time, these consultative strategies should build strong partnerships between parents/guardians, childminders, practitioners, policy-makers, and other relevant professionals. Such partnerships should facilitate collective decision-making rooted in knowledge, research, and best practices. This approach should better ensure that all children in this country receive the learning supports they need and are entitled to.

**Work plan**

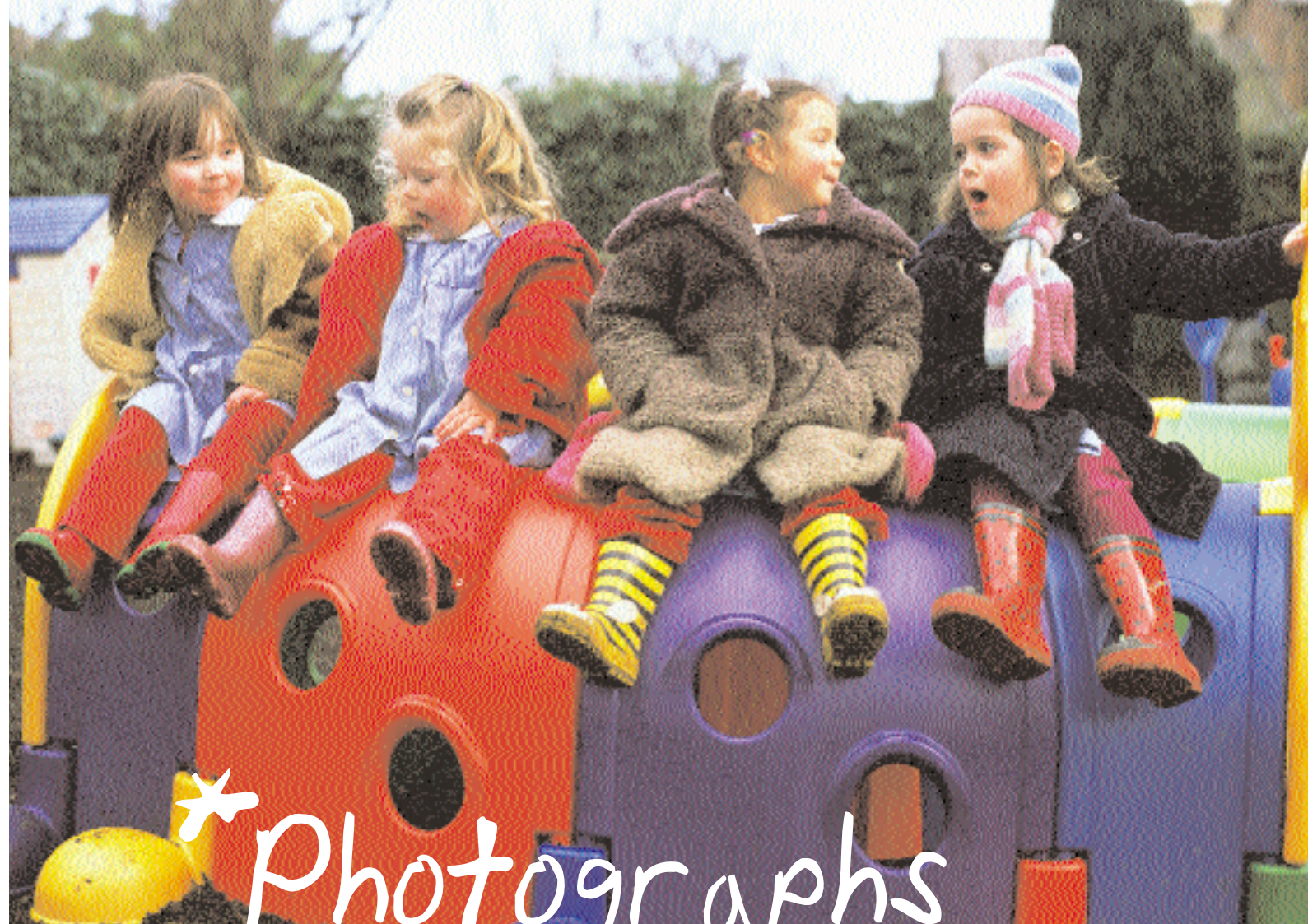
The following table sets out the envisaged timeframe for the consultation process.

Timeline for the consultation	
Date	Action
March 2004	Launch of the consultative document Towards a Framework for Early Learning
March – August 2004	Consultation with the early childhood sector (seminars, briefings,...)
Autumn 2004	Invitational seminar – final report on the findings from the consultation, revised plan for the framework

**Conclusion**

The last decade has seen significant developments in policy with regard to children’s rights in Irish society, as well as in early childhood care and education service provision. This has led to a growing appreciation of children as capable and competent learners, and of the benefits of supporting them in their learning through quality provision.

The development of the Framework for Early Learning is an important step in supporting existing early childhood care and education. The model of partnership and consultation, described in this section, should enable the NCCA to draw upon the expertise and commitment within the sector. By reading and commenting on the ideas presented in this document, the sector can support and input to the development work. In time, this will help to ensure that we create a national framework which can make a positive contribution to all children’s lives as learners. The Framework for Early Learning can also represent the unprecedented coming together of different philosophies, approaches and pedagogies.



# \* Photographs

The NCCA would like to thank all those who kindly consented to having their photographs taken and used in this document. The NCCA was granted parental/guardian permission in the case of the children in the photographs. This was considered necessary and appropriate with children in the age group from birth to six years.

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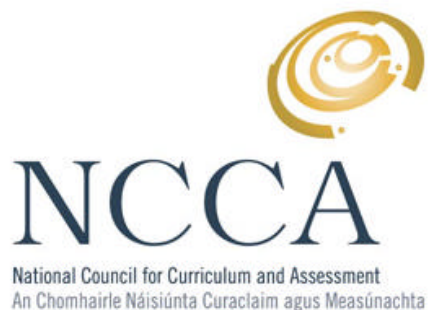
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NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND  
ASSESSMENT



TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR  
EARLY LEARNING  
FINAL CONSULTATION REPORT

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MAY 2005



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* was published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in March 2004. It recommended the development of a national framework for learning for all children in Ireland from birth to six years. Nine key ideas which were presented in the document provided the focus for the consultation. This report presents findings from the consultation and identifies issues for further consideration by the NCCA in the development of the framework. A summary of the report follows.

Section 1 (Introduction) provides the background to the consultative document and reports on recent developments in early childhood care and education.

Section 2 (Consultative Process) describes the strands of the consultation -seminars, briefing meetings, written submissions, response forms and an invitational seminar.

Section 3 (Findings: Response forms) and Section 4 (Findings: Regional seminars, briefings, written submissions) present findings from different strands of the consultation. A summary of findings for each of the 9 key ideas is provided below.

### **Key idea: A national framework**

Participants reported that:

- the development of a national framework will support children in their learning and will help raise the status of early learning in Ireland.
- the national framework should offer information and advice to parents/guardians on supporting their children's learning through everyday routines and practices.
- sustained long-term planning and investment in early childhood care and education (including greater inter-agency and inter-departmental co-operation, and ongoing professional development for those working in the sector) will be pivotal to the implementation of the framework.

### **Key idea: Vision**

Participants reported that:

- they agreed strongly with the centrality of relationships and the environment as two key contexts for early learning in the framework.
- the theories of learning and development which will underpin the development of the framework require greater elaboration.
- the vision of the framework should embrace the principle of cultural diversity more explicitly. This was considered particularly important given Ireland's increasingly culturally diverse population, and the body of research documenting the early years as a critical time in laying the foundations for respecting and understanding difference as a natural part of life.

### **Key idea: Aims**

Participants reported that:

- by acknowledging the range of good practices that currently exist in the early childhood sector in Ireland, the consultative document emphasised the importance of ensuring coherence and connectedness between these initiatives and the framework.

- the importance of good parenting skills in supporting early learning should be highlighted in the framework.
- in considering how to present and disseminate the framework to parents and practitioners, the NCCA should ensure that the ideas in the framework are accessible to all adults who work with children.

**Key idea: Image of the child as a learner**

Participants reported that:

- they agreed strongly with the image of the child as an active learner, which was presented in the consultative document. They noted that mixed-age groupings can benefit all children by promoting social interaction among children and enhancing language competence.
- they agreed strongly with the crucial role of play in the holistic development of the child. Participants suggested that children should be afforded opportunities to experience a range of different forms of play. Outdoor play was identified as a component of the framework which would require significant attention.

**Key idea: The adult's role**

Participants reported that:

- they agreed strongly with the pro-active role of the adult in guiding, supporting and scaffolding the child's learning, which was presented in the consultative document. A policy of professional development for practitioners was considered particularly important in supporting the use of the framework by adults.
- they agreed strongly with the adult's role in supporting, facilitating, and modeling play and noted that the framework should provide practical examples of how this can be achieved.
- communication and close collaboration between all adults working with children will be integral to the success of the framework.

**Key idea: Thematic framework**

Participants reported that:

- they agreed with the use of a thematic approach to presenting children's learning in the framework and noted that it emphasised the holistic and integrated nature of early learning.
- they were concerned that a thematic approach, unlike a developmental domain approach, could be subject to multiple interpretations.
- some modifications were required to ensure that the four themes captured the full extent of children's learning, e.g. the child as a contributor, as someone who loves, who makes and does things, and as someone who actively shapes the lives of those around him/her.
- the theme well-being could be regarded as being qualitatively different to the other themes. The work of the National Children's Office on developing indicators on well-being were considered important in this context.

**Key idea: The role of assessment**

Participants reported that:

- the role of assessment in supporting children's learning will require greater elaboration in the framework. Participants noted that the language of assessment itself should be re-examined to ensure shared understanding of assessment terms amongst all practitioners from different contexts and settings.

- they agreed with the emphasis the consultative document places on assessment for empowering the child as a learner. Participants noted that by focusing on the child's strengths, abilities and progress and building on these, assessment can be positive and affirmative for the child.
- relationships and play should provide the key contexts for assessment, just as they do for the child's learning.
- time for assessment was a significant issue for practitioners in supporting children's learning.

**Key idea: Contents of the framework**

Participants reported that:

- they agreed with the proposed contents of the framework, outlined in the consultative document.
- the NCCA should strive to achieve a balance between providing broad and specific advice in the Framework to best support adults in their work with children
- the contents of the Framework should be differentiated for the range of adults who support children in their early learning which could result in differentiated materials for specific groups.

**Key idea: A model for presenting the child's learning**

Participants reported that:

- they agreed with the proposed model (themes, aims, learning goals, suggestions for learning activities/experiences, learning exemplars).
- they were concerned about the interpretation and implementation of the model, given the diversity of expertise and experience among those who care for children.
- the extent of professional development (e.g. on how the framework would inform daily activities, routines and practices of practitioners) provided will significantly impact the success of the framework.
- the differentiation between learning and development will need to be explicated in the framework. Participants noted that this differentiation of terms will have implications for how learning is presented in the proposed model.
- ongoing consultation during the development of the framework should target a broad representation of all those for whom the framework is being developed. Greater involvement of parents and health practitioners in the consultation was considered vital.

Section 5 (Preliminary signposts for ongoing work) presents a summary of the consultation findings and identifies areas for further consideration. These include examining/revisiting:

- the theoretical underpinnings of the framework
- the relationship between care and education
- the most appropriate use of assessment with children in early childhood
- the four proposed themes
- the differentiation of the framework to cater for the range of adults responsible for children's early learning

This final section also outlines priorities for the NCCA in the ongoing developmental work on the framework which include targeting parents, practitioners and health sector professionals in the ongoing consultation with the sector. The development of portraits

of early learning settings is highlighted as one key to ensuring that the framework is informed by the experiences of children and practitioners in a variety of settings and contexts.





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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

The publication of the consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* on 29<sup>th</sup> March 2004 marked a milestone in curriculum development for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and for curriculum development in Ireland.

The Education Act (1998) gives the NCCA responsibility for advising the Minister on curriculum and assessment matters in the early childhood period as a whole. In fulfilling its remit in early childhood education, the NCCA developed the consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*. This document forms the basis for working in partnership with the early childhood sector in developing a national framework to support all children in their learning throughout the early childhood period from birth to six years.

The consultation process which followed this publication offered an opportunity for all with an interest in the care and education of young children to respond to the ideas in the document. This in turn provided the NCCA with extremely valuable feedback and has paved the way for the beginning of the development of the framework. The NCCA is most grateful to all who participated in the consultative process with such enthusiasm and commitment.

### **The curriculum context**

At present, Ireland has no national framework to guide adults in supporting children from birth to six years in their learning. It is important that the development of a national framework for early learning draws on the range of expertise and experience in curriculum development which currently exists in the sector.

The consultative document notes that a range of curriculum guidance and practices exists in this country and these are being used very successfully by many practitioners. The *Framework for Early Learning* will continue to support and complement existing curriculum guidance and will endeavour to create coherence and connectedness across learning throughout early childhood. The consultative document (page 36, figure 2.1) shows how the framework can embrace and complement the breadth of curriculum guidance which already exists in Ireland. It shows, for example, how the framework can provide coherent links with the later stages in children's learning in the Primary School Curriculum.

The absence of national curriculum guidelines in Ireland was discussed at the National Forum in Early Childhood Education (1998). A number of recommendations emanating from this forum and presented in *Ready to Learn*, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999b) focused on the need to address this gap in curriculum development. In particular, the recommendations concerned

*The development of guidelines on developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood education... [which] ..have regard to the need to provide a range of experiences and learning opportunities to enhance all aspects of a child's development – cognitive, emotional, linguistic,*



*moral, physical, sensory and social. They will also take account of the need for structure and for learning through play.*

*... [the development of] a recommended or “specimen” curriculum for pre-school children, which will provide more specific detail on content and methodology... [and] ...a less formal curriculum, for children up to 3 years.*

(Ready to Learn, 1999b, pp.56-57).

The White Paper also recognises the importance of supporting parents/guardians in their role as early educators through the provision of information and advice.

*The production of information packs and provision of advice on how children learn and how parents may assist their children, is another important support.*

(Ready to Learn, 1999b, pp.115-116).

These recommendations for curriculum development reflect a rapidly changing and developing early childhood sector. Increased funding through the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 2000-2006), the return/entry of increasing numbers of women to the labour market, the launch of a new infant curriculum in the Primary School Curriculum (1999a), the establishment of County Childcare Committees and the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) (2002) have contributed to elevating early childhood education to the national policy agenda. Coupled with policy and legislative developments, this changing landscape provides the backdrop for the NCCA’s work in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.

## **The environmental context**

The NCCA’s consultation on the document *Toward a Framework for Early Learning* has taken place in a climate of growing awareness of the importance of Early Childhood nationally. A number of recent developments that relate to early childhood care and learning in Ireland are worth noting. Events and developments which will guide and inform the development of the NCCA’s *Framework for Early Learning* are briefly summarised below:

An **ESRI** report published in 2003 contested that crime rates would drop, health would improve and the gap between rich and poor would narrow if children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, were immersed in rich educational environments from the age of three. It recommended that primary schools should have a maximum class size of 15 pupils and it argued that significantly increased spending on primary education was the most effective way of tackling educational disadvantage and preventing many long-term social problems.

In September, 2004, the **OECD** review team published their ‘short-review’ of early childhood policies and services in Ireland, which was undertaken by

an **OECD** review team in November 2002. In relation to the current work being undertaken by NCCA, the report made some key observations and recommendations. These are outlined below:

- Consideration needs to be given to how the framework will interface with the National Quality Framework, and the quality standards laid down in the national Child Care Regulations, and with other curricula in use in Ireland such as Montessori, HighScope, Froebel etc.
- The OECD team sees as necessary, widespread consultation among the major stakeholders, and close co-ordination between DJELR, DES, CECDE and NCCA on the development of national goals and a quality framework for early childhood care and education.
- The OECD team recommends the development of an appropriate programme, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. A high quality programme in early childhood implies “well-being, child-initiative, play and involvement. If a programme is over-focused on formal skills, it is more likely to provide opportunities for children to fail, and to develop a higher dependency on adults, promoting in them negative perceptions of their own competencies” (Stipek et al., 1995 cited p.86).

In a broader sense, the report makes some key recommendations in relation to the early childhood care and education sector as a whole, many of which will have long-term implications for the implementation of the framework for early learning. These recommendations can be categorised under two headings. The first relate to the introduction of systemic changes, for example, the recommendation to co-ordinate early childhood care and learning under one Ministry. The second category of recommendations is setting-specific relating to, e.g. accreditation and subsidisation of quality child-minders and the alteration of structures in the infant school.

In October 2004, the **National Economic and Social Forum (NESF)** held the first meeting of its project team on Early Childhood Care and Education. The focus of the project is to agree a vision for the future direction of Early Childhood Education and Care policy and to identify how this vision can be implemented.

In December 2004, the **Southern Health Board** established two pilot psychological health projects for toddlers. It is hoped that this will pave the way for the development of Ireland’s first dedicated mental health service for infants. These services were established to promote secure and healthy relationships in families, and avoid problems in the parent-child relationship that might place a baby or toddler’s emotional, social and cognitive development at risk. Through these projects, the psychologists involved are keen to promote the widely held view that a baby or toddler is an active rather than passive participant in the caregiver relationship, showing initiatives from very early on, and that just meeting the physical needs of a baby is not sufficient.

In January 2005, **Barnardos**, Ireland's leading children's charity, launched a 12 year strategy and investment programme entitled 'Valuing Childhood – Cherishing Children'. Barnardos will incorporate three targeted programmes within its services: 'Best Start' for 0-5 year olds which will concentrate on early prevention, intervention and support at a pre-school level; 'Best Chance' for 5-10 year olds which will focus on improved learning and development to help children stay in school and progress; and 'Best Choice' for 10-15 year olds which will aim to help vulnerable children make the transition to young adulthood. The programme will be underpinned by investment and activity in six areas – services, research, advocacy, field building, organisational support and funding.

In Spring 2005, the **NCCA** will publish findings from the *Primary Curriculum Review: Phase 1*. This review gathered data from primary school teachers' on their use of the Primary School Curriculum for English, visual arts and mathematics during the 2003/2004 school year. Data were gathered from children in junior and senior infants as well as from their parents, teachers and principals. These findings will inform guidelines and support for teachers of infant children.

The **CECDE** continues to develop a quality framework for early childhood education. Two directly related functions of the Centre are to develop early education quality standards in relation to all aspects of early childhood education and to develop a support framework to encourage compliance with quality standards by early education providers.

The **NFQ/ECCE** will provide national standards for quality in early childhood care and education. These standards will apply to all settings where children aged birth to six years are present as learners including full day care, childminding, infant classes in primary schools, play groups etc. The standards will cover all aspects of provision (e.g. the environment, curriculum programme and activities, equipment and materials, staffing etc.). A second aspect of the Framework will involve the provision of a range of supports for ECCE practitioners and services towards the enhancement and implementation of quality. This will include, for example, mechanisms for providing advice and mentoring, information and resources and communication networks. A third element of the Framework will be concerned with assessment of quality. The purpose of the assessment is to provide information, which will allow for the dynamic development of the NFQ/ECCE so that it adequately meets the needs of families, children and providers. A national award system, as envisaged in the White Paper on Early Education, will be part of the assessment process.

## Structure of the report

This report completes the discussion and analysis of findings from the consultation on the document *Towards a framework for early learning* which were first presented in the interim report on the consultation. Sections 4 and 5 draw attention to issues which met with broad agreement and Section 5 highlights issues which require further consideration and exploration during the development of the framework.

The report comprises six sections as follows:

- Section 1: Introduction
- Section 2: The consultative process
- Section 3: Findings - Response forms
- Section 4: Findings - Regional seminars, briefing meetings, written submissions
- Section 5: Preliminary sign-posts for ongoing work
- section 6: References

Sections 3 and 4, which present findings from the strands of the consultation, are organised under nine main headings. These headings correspond to the key ideas used to structure much of the consultation. The overlap in the issues identified in the data across the various consultation activities, highlights their centrality to the development and implementation of the *Framework for Early Learning*.





## **SECTION 2: THE CONSULTATIVE PROCESS**

### **Rationale for the consultation**

To be effective, the *Framework for Early Learning* must be grounded in the realities, the challenges and the complexities of early childhood care and education in Ireland. The framework needs to be flexible and dynamic to accommodate the changing developmental capacities and needs of children from birth to six years. It also needs to reflect the rich variety of contexts in which children learn and develop as well as the diversity of provision for this learning (Ireland, 1999b).

The development of the *Framework for Early Learning* will benefit from the contributions and involvement of many people including children, parents/guardians, childminders, practitioners, managers, academics/researchers, policy makers and others who have an interest in early learning. The consultation, based on the consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, has enabled the NCCA to identify and explore multiple perspectives amongst those in the early childhood sector on key ideas influencing the development of a national framework for early learning. In this way, the development of the framework will be embedded in the Irish context thus increasing the framework's relevance and usefulness to the early childhood sector as a whole.

### **Consultation activities**

Following the launch of the consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* in March 2004, the NCCA organised a public consultation from April-December 2004. The primary purpose of this consultation was to begin to refine the design and content of a national framework for early learning. There were five consultative activities, as follows:

- response forms
- regional seminars
- briefing meetings
- written submissions
- invitational seminar.

Through these different activities, the NCCA sought the early childhood sector's views and thoughts on nine key ideas presented in the consultative document:

- a national framework
- a vision for the framework
- aims for the framework
- the image of the child as a learner
- the adult's role in supporting early learning
- a thematic framework
- contents of the framework
- the role of assessment
- a model for presenting children's early learning in the framework.

Each of the consultation activities offered the NCCA access to different perspectives and experiences, in varying levels of detail within the sector, on the nine key ideas.

The NCCA would like to acknowledge, in particular, the support and advice received from the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) during our work in planning the various consultation activities. The CECDE shared its insights and experiences in consulting with the early childhood sector in late 2003.

The following section outlines the five consultation activities, explaining their purpose(s) and how they were organised.

## **Response forms**

The purpose of the response form (questionnaire) was to gather multiple perspectives on the nine key ideas. The form elicited feedback through closed and open-response items. It comprised 2 parts: part 1 profiled the respondents, and part 2 collected their responses to the nine ideas.

Part 1 required respondents to provide information regarding

- the early childhood setting(s) in which they worked
- the range of children's learning needs they had experience in supporting
- the age range of children they had experience in working with
- respondents' experience (in years) of supporting children in their early learning.

Part 2 of the response form presented the nine key ideas from the consultative document and invited respondents to indicate their level of agreement with these, based on their own experiences, using a four-point Likert scale (Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree) and comment boxes.

The response form was available in multiple formats.

- Hard copies of the form were distributed with the consultative document.
- The form was available for download as a portable document format file (PDF) from the NCCA website at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie).
- The form was available for completion online on the NCCA website.

Given the NCCA's responsibility to develop a national framework to support children's learning throughout early childhood, it was important that the NCCA facilitated the input of the broad spectrum of people who work in or have an interest in early learning, to the consultation. Four thousand copies of the document and the form were distributed by post to key organizations and to personnel working in selected early childhood settings ensuring geographical spread and diversity of setting. This created a consultation population broadly representative of the early childhood sector. The response form was initially open from 29<sup>th</sup> March until 30<sup>th</sup> June 2004. The closing date was extended to 30<sup>th</sup> July following discussions with the early childhood sector.

## **Regional seminars**

The NCCA organised four regional seminars as part of the consultation. The seminars provided the NCCA with opportunities to present the nine key ideas to the sector and to place the development of the *Framework for Early Learning* in context. The seminars also provided opportunities for the sector to begin to explore the nine key ideas and to bring different expertise and experience to bear on the discussions.

The seminars were held in June, allowing time following the launch of the consultative document, for the early childhood sector to begin to become familiar with the NCCA's plans and proposals for the development of a national framework for early learning. The seminars were advertised through letters to national organisations, agencies and networks, county childcare committees, third level institutions and the education partners. Advertisements were placed on websites frequently accessed by the sector. The invitation to attend was extended to all those working in the sector and those with an interest in early learning.

The Co-ordinator of the local County/City Childcare Committee and the Director of the local Education Centre co-hosted the seminars for the NCCA. Building on the experiences and successes of a consultative model developed and used by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education in late 2003, representatives of national organisations in the early childhood sector were invited to facilitate discussion groups as part of the seminar activities.

## **Briefing meetings**

The NCCA facilitated a number of briefing meetings with the early childhood sector. These meetings were organised on request by organisations/agencies/networks and so on. The meetings served to provide different groups within the sector with opportunities to inform the NCCA of their particular perspectives, thoughts and concerns regarding this curriculum development work. Many of the briefings supported organisations/agencies/networks and so on in consulting with their own members on the key ideas in the consultative document, thus broadening participation in the consultation process.

The format of the briefing meetings typically included a presentation by the NCCA on the nine key ideas in the consultative document, followed by discussion. In some instances, discussion groups were used to focus on specific key ideas. The format of the meeting depended on the needs of the particular group in question.

The NCCA noted key themes which arose during discussions at the various briefing meetings. These themes are included in the analysis presented in section 4 of the report. A list of those involved in briefing meetings is included in Table 4.2 in Section 4.

## **Written submissions**

Throughout the consultation period, written submissions were received from organisations and agencies working in the sector. These submissions enabled organisations and individuals to make more detailed responses to the NCCA on the

nine key ideas than that facilitated by the response forms. The submissions also provided opportunities to these organisations and individuals to bring their particular perspectives to bear on discussions about the framework.

While the facility to make a written submission was open to the early childhood sector at large, specific invitations were issued to the education partners and organisations representing the early childhood sector through the NCCA's Early Childhood Committee. The closing date for receipt of the submissions was 17<sup>th</sup> September 2004. Details of those who have made submissions are included in Table 4.3 in section 4 of the report.

### **Invitational seminar**

To conclude the public consultation, the NCCA hosted an invitational seminar on 9<sup>th</sup> December. This event provided an opportunity for the early childhood sector and the NCCA to begin to reflect on and to consider some of the preliminary findings from the consultation and their implications for moving forward in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. Further details on the invitational seminar are provided in Section 4.



## SECTION 3: FINDINGS - RESPONSE FORMS

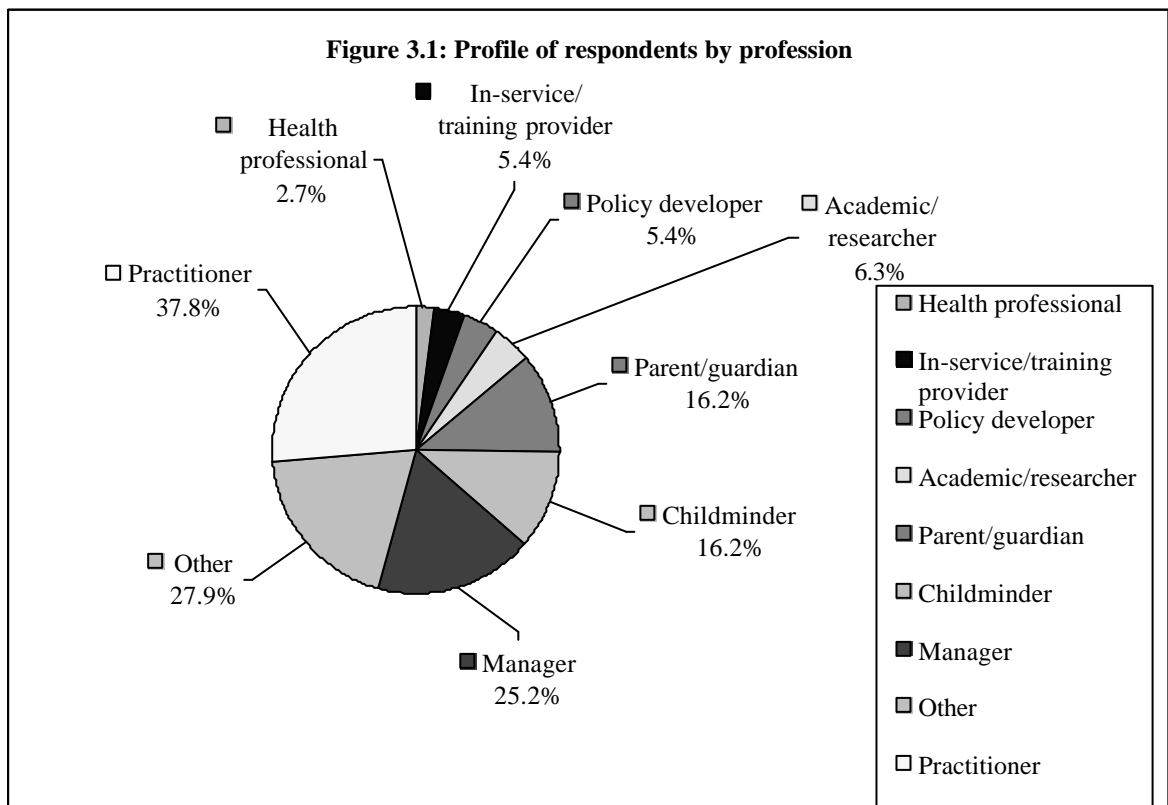
### Introduction

This section of the report presents an analysis of the findings from the response forms. The first part of the analysis profiles those who completed the response forms. The remainder of the analysis presents respondents' views and thoughts on the nine key ideas. In total, the NCCA received 115 completed response forms. A small number of these were completed by whole staffs in early childhood settings. Others were forwarded to the NCCA by representatives from national/regional organisations.

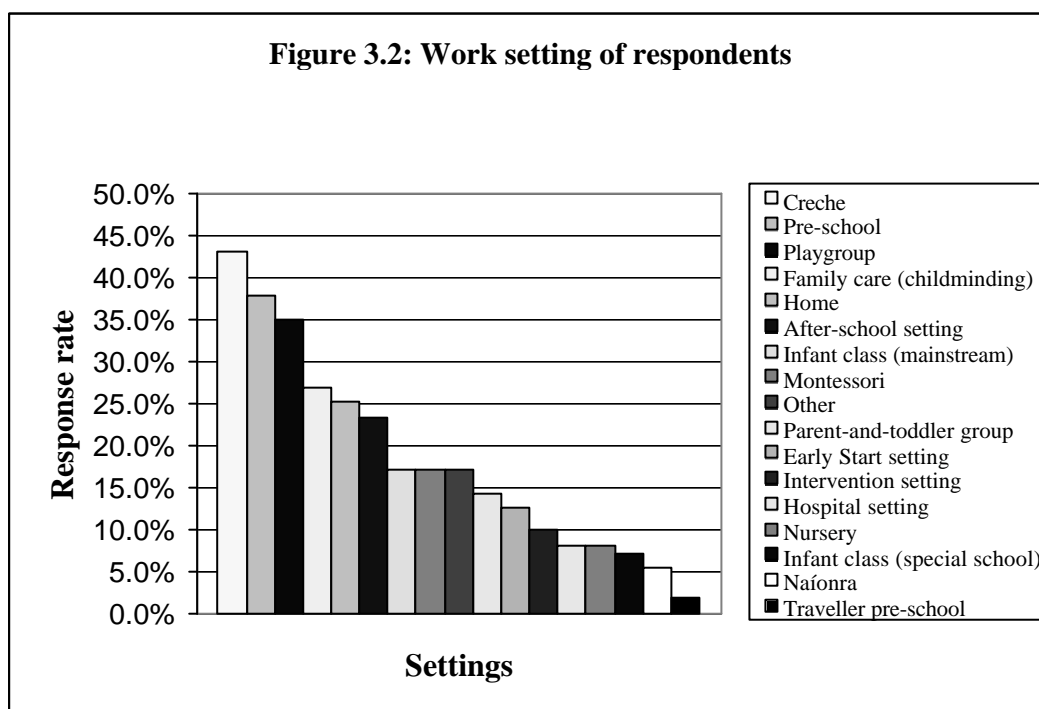
On receipt of completed response forms, the data on the hard copies were inputted to an online survey tool ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). This online tool enabled the NCCA to separate the quantitative data from the qualitative. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), while the qualitative data were analysed by identifying themes within responses to individual key ideas. Further analysis of the themes often allowed for the identification of sub-themes. Quotations from the data were selected to support this analysis. Interspersed through the analysis, these quotations present the voices of the early childhood sector in the consultation.

### Analysis of findings

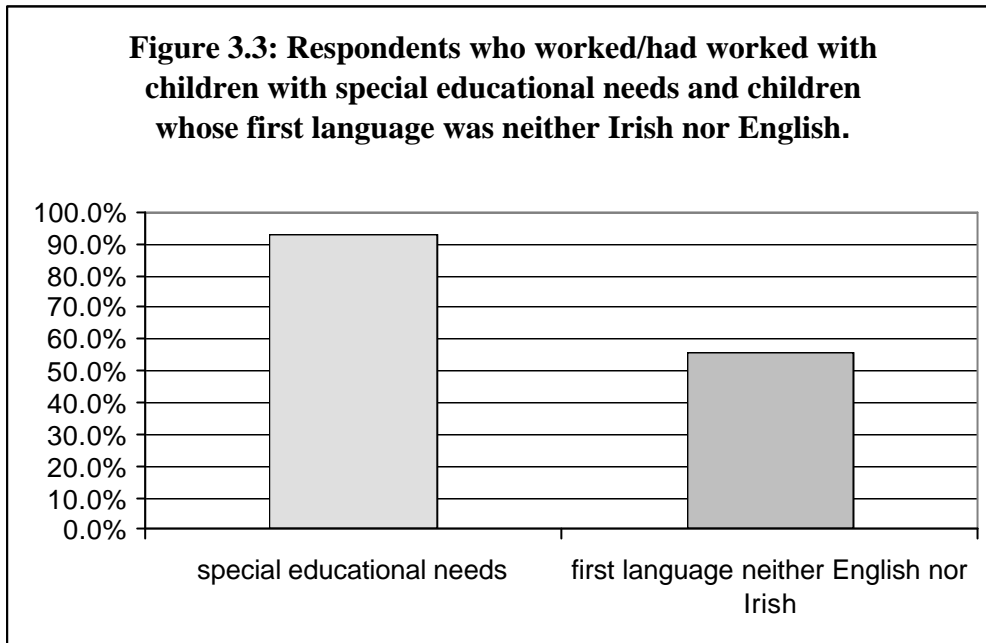
#### Part 1: Profile of respondents



Collectively, those who completed the response form broadly represented the diversity of people who work in or have an interest in early childhood care and education in Ireland. Respondents frequently chose a number of options when responding to this question, reflecting the breadth of their experiences in supporting children’s early learning. The group most represented was practitioners (37.8%), a term used in the consultative document to describe all those who work with young children in a specialized manner. The next most frequently chosen response was ‘other.’ On analysis of this data, the NCCA noted that 7 respondents with management roles in early childhood settings chose this option. Similarly, 4 primary school teachers and 3 childcare/playgroup workers used this option instead of responding as ‘practitioners’. Other respondents who availed of the ‘other’ response option included child policy and development workers (3), quality officers (2) and health professionals (2).



The broadly representative nature of the respondents as a group was reflected in the analysis of the settings in which they reported working. Respondents frequently ticked a number of settings again reflecting the breadth of their experiences in working with young children. The most frequently represented setting was crèches (43.2%) with pre-schools (37.8%) and playgroups (35.1%) equally being well represented. The least represented settings included Traveller pre-schools (1.8%), Naíonraí – Irish medium playgroups (5.4%) and Infant classes in special schools (7.2%). This would reflect the number of such settings nationally.



The majority of respondents (92.9%) reported that they worked/had worked with children with special educational needs. This response could be reflective of greater inclusion of children with these needs in mainstream settings.

Over half of respondents (55.7%) reported that they worked/had worked with children whose first language was neither Irish nor English. This is probably indicative of the increasing multi-cultural nature of Irish society and the growing participation of children whose first language is neither Irish nor English, in early childhood settings.

### **Part 1: The most important considerations in enriching and extending children's early learning**

Participants were asked to list what they considered to be the three most important considerations in enriching and extending children's early learning. It was suggested that they could make reference to a particular approach to early learning if they so wished. 86 responses were received for this question. The analysis of this data saw the emergence of three main themes; the child as a learner, the role of the adult and the environment.

#### **1. The Child as a learner**

This theme received most attention and could be split into three sub-themes; the child as a learner, a child-centred holistic approach and inter-departmental co-operation.

##### The Child as a learner

95% (82) of respondents made reference to the child as a learner. 23% (20) stressed the importance of learning through play. The level and quality of play opportunities offered was considered significant. 13% (12) of respondents specifically mentioned active learning and felt that it should be encouraged, e.g., *'young children's learning*

*will be enriched and extended in a well planned learning environment designed to promote and support active learning'.*

Linked to this was the view that learning should be fun. The Highscope approach to early learning was advocated by a number of respondents. 9% (8) of respondents considered that children's *'interaction with adults and children through play as they learn to share and communicate with others'*, was of benefit in their social development. Some felt that children should be granted the freedom to choose activities and develop naturally. Others stressed the importance of a language rich environment. It was suggested that the maturity of a child should be taken into account when making a decision about a child's *'readiness'* for school. It was also noted that a child's ability to learn very much depended on his/her *'health, social and psychological development'*.

#### A child-centred holistic approach

It was the opinion of 18% (16) of respondents that the individual needs of children should be supported and that a child-centred holistic approach should be adopted *'so that every child can develop to his/her potential'*. This was deemed to be of particular importance for children with special educational needs. It was suggested that child adult ratios should be low enough to *'allow for thorough observation of children and the subsequent planning of programmes to meet the individual needs of children with all their differences'*. 10% (9) of respondents stressed the importance of encouraging the development of children's self-esteem and confidence and of fostering independence.

#### Inter-departmental co-operation

Very closely linked with a child-centred holistic approach is the co-operation of outside agencies when required. 9% (8) of respondents were of the opinion that, particularly in the case of a child with special educational needs, the early intervention of speech therapists, social workers and other medical staff is necessary to support learning.

## **2. The Role of the Adult**

The second major theme that emerged was the role of the adult. Again this can be broken down into a number of sub-themes; the role of the adult, training and planning and assessment.

#### The Role of the Adult

The quality of care provided by the caregiver was considered an important factor in enriching and extending children's early learning by 18% (16) of respondents, *e.g., 'having a caring adult who provides love, security and opportunities to develop and who has a knowledge of child development'*.

16% (14) felt that the role of the adult should be to support, guide and scaffold children's early learning. Parental involvement was considered essential and the concept that the parent is the primary educator and the home is the first classroom was

stressed. It was also considered important that the caregivers should praise and encourage children in addition to spending time listening to them.

### Training

19% (17) of respondents believed that carers and educators should be suitably qualified and that continuing to update skills and knowledge was desirable. 6% (6) also felt that the provision of support and information for parents was necessary if they were to develop their role as primary educators to the fullest.

### Planning

15% (13) of respondents expressed the view that early learning is best promoted and supported in a well-planned learning environment. It was suggested that this planned approach could enrich and extend learning by providing variety, opportunity, continuity and development. It was considered important that all staff should be familiar with this planned approach. Likewise, '*a systematic approach to good practice, policies and procedure*' was advocated. 3% (3) of respondents suggested that it would be worthwhile to have an individual learning plan for each child.

### Assessment and Evaluation

14% (12) of the replies received, mentioned assessment or evaluation. One respondent noted, '*the first consideration in enriching and extending children's early learning is to identify the needs of the child. An identification / assessment / screening process is essential and should be provided for all children*'

Observation was listed as being an important means of assessing both a child's needs and development. Regular evaluation, both of the curriculum and of each child's progress, was considered to be helpful. Programmes could subsequently be revised '*in the light of findings*'.

## **3. The Environment**

77% (67) of respondents considered the environment to have an important influence in enriching and extending children's early learning. 25% (22) of the respondents felt that if learning was to take place, then the environment in which it was to happen should be safe, secure and happy. 13% (12) were also of the opinion that the learning environment should be rich and stimulating, while others deemed it important that children should be presented with a range of choices and experiences. 17% (15) of respondents felt that, in order to support children's learning, it was necessary to have age-appropriate equipment and materials, adequate buildings and spaces and the facilities to allow outdoor play. The home environment was referred to as being an important learning environment. The child's background and socio-economic circumstances were listed as having a bearing on learning. 5% (5) of the respondents felt that good communication between caregivers, parents and schools was beneficial and they were in favour of schools adopting a friendly, open approach where both parents and pupils would feel welcome.



## **Part 1: Open comment at end of response form**

The final section in the on-line response form provided respondents with an opportunity to make any additional comments that they felt would be important for the development of the framework. 59 responses were received. The analysis of these responses can best be summarised under the following headings:

### **1. Agreement**

Of the responses received, just over 33% (20) welcomed, and expressed strong support for, the development of a framework document. This would be '*vital*', making '*an important contribution to the early learning stage of development*' and would be a means of making '*the whole area of child-care more cohesive*'. The consultative document 'Towards a framework for Early Learning' was described variously as a valuable document, as reflecting '*good practice in all areas*', and as having included all the '*relevant information, themes, aims and goals*'. There was agreement with '*the identification and presentation of relationships, child-child and child-adult, as central to care, learning and development*'.

### **2. Concerns**

While the overall response to the development of a framework was positive, a number of concerns were highlighted. 10% (6) of respondents feared that there might be an over-emphasis on learning and they stressed the importance of affording children the freedom to make their own choices, to have opportunities for free play and for socialising with their peers. Others were concerned that the development of a framework document could result in an increase in 'paperwork' if more time was devoted to planning, observation and assessment. The hope was expressed that all children could have the opportunity to avail of early childhood education, regardless of socio-economic circumstances.

### **3. Implementation**

23% (14) of responses dealt with issues concerning the implementation of the framework. Many felt that if the framework was to be implemented successfully, then it would have to be funded adequately and an indication of the cost associated with this could should be given. There were suggestions that it should be piloted in a variety of child-care settings. Two respondents proposed that Government Departments, and in particular the Department of Education & Science and the Department of Health, should work together to support the education and care of children between 0 and 6 years. There was also a call for closer links to be established between pre-schools and primary schools so that all practitioners involved in the area of early learning could work as a team. It was emphasised that the approach adopted in the implementation of a framework should be a child-centred holistic one '*as the child must always be central*'.

### **4. Training**

30% (18) respondents emphasised the need for comprehensive in-service training for practitioners, to assist in the full implementation of the framework. It was proposed

that parents and carers too should be supported and that plans should be put in place to ensure that the content of the framework could also be imparted to them. 8% (5) of the respondents emphasised that the support of parents, along with other adults, would be crucial for the successful implementation of the plan.

## Recommendations

32% (19) of respondents made recommendations about what they would like to see included in the framework. A number of respondents suggested that it should be very specific in the presentation of strategies and techniques that could be employed by adults in its implementation. Others wanted activities outlined that could be used to develop the themes and felt that it *'must be explicit and detailed in its content'* and that examples of resources, songs, stories etc. should be included along with *'core knowledge and essential skills (as associated documents) for reference'*. One respondent was of the opinion that the framework should be extended to include the after-school setting. It was felt that the needs of children with special needs, the disadvantaged and non-nationals should be more explicitly featured and that the framework should ensure that all children are recognised as equals. The suggestion was made that a programme be developed that would assist practitioners in helping children with their moral and spiritual development. One key area of development that was perceived to have been omitted was that of physical development. It was also considered important that children should be consulted in the course of the process of drawing up the document.

## Part 2: Nine key ideas

### Key idea: A national framework

**Table 3.1: Response to the development of a national framework**

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>60.8%</b>	<b>62</b>
Agree	39.2%	40
Disagree	0%	0
Strongly disagree	0%	0

Valid cases=102

Respondents displayed complete agreement with the idea of developing a national framework for early learning. While they reported their concerns and issues in the comment boxes, none disagreed with the idea of a national framework.

58 respondents chose to avail of the option to comment on the development of a national framework. They identified 2 main benefits of such a framework. 15 respondents (26%) saw the framework as a way of supporting early childhood as a time of great opportunity for all children. They believed this would contribute to the equality of opportunity for young children.

*I think a national framework will promote better practice. It will give children better opportunity to learn at such an important time for learning. It will provide a good foundation for children which they will*

*carry through their life helping them become competent well adjusted adults.*

*...All children regardless of location have an equal right to access appropriate education. If we have a national framework we then have some way of ensuring equality and quality.*

The second benefit of a national framework noted by respondents (21%) concerned the potential of this framework to contribute to greater co-ordination and coherence in the provision for children’s learning.

*I feel that childcare providers will be able to provide a much more consistent approach to childcare by following a framework. We will be able to compare ideas and resources.*

*It’s important so all services in early childhood work to the same goal: the child learning through their setting.*

Some respondents (14%) cautioned against equating co-ordination and coherence with uniformity and specification. Respondents emphasised the importance of the child being at the centre of the learning process and the adult’s responsibility to ensure that each child had opportunities to learn and to develop at his/her own pace and in response to his/her own needs. They suggested that this would help to celebrate, respect and build on the uniqueness of each child.

*It [The framework] needs to be supportive rather than prescriptive.*

*Flexibility should be maintained.*

In welcoming the development of a national framework, some respondents (21%) emphasised the necessity to resource the implementation of the framework. Two types of resources were identified. These included professional development for early years staff (14%), and financial assistance for early childhood settings (10%).

*There is a need for high quality training in the 0-6 sector, and particularly specific training in the 0-3 group for practitioners.*

*My main concerns would be...whether any funding will be available to provide the resources necessary to carry out this curriculum.*

This theme of resourcing the implementation of a national framework was identified in respondents’ comments on many other key ideas in the consultative document.

### **Key idea: Vision**

The consultative document articulates a vision of all children learning and developing within trusting and loving relationships with others, and through meaningful engagement with their environments. The uniqueness of each child lies at the heart of this vision.

**Table 3.2: Response to the vision**

<b>Level of agreement</b>	<b>Response rate</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>59</b>
Agree	40%	40
Disagree	1%	1
Strongly disagree	0%	0

Valid cases=100

Almost all respondents (99%) agreed with the vision for the framework. 47 commented on the content of the vision. Analysis of the comments highlighted three themes. The first theme related to the emphasis the vision placed on all children. The second theme was the role of parents/guardians and the third theme concerned resources.

Many respondents (34%) welcomed the vision's focus on **all** children.

*It's [the vision] the ideal and a goal to work towards for all children for every age group.*

They believed this emphasis on all children was important in the context of equality and diversity. In particular, respondents recognised the potential the vision had to support equality of opportunity for all children in early childhood, a theme identified in respondents' comments on the development of a national framework.

*Important for all children to develop to their full potential in such an important time ...*

Respondents also drew attention to the importance of the vision embracing and celebrating the diversity of early childhoods as experienced by children in Ireland.

*This [vision] is timely given our multi-cultural society. We need to move away from historical tradition and embrace diversity.*

The role of parents/guardians was identified as the second major theme in respondents' comments on the vision. In particular, respondents (17%) highlighted the necessity to support parents/guardians in their role as educators. This support could take the form of information, and/or training. Respondents believed this would help parents/guardians to make more positive contributions to their children's early learning.

*...there needs to be a vast amount of information and training offered to parents...It will require a new approach of promoting positive parenting and parental responsibilities.*

The third major theme in respondents' comments on the vision was the issue of resources. While welcoming the vision, a number of respondents (15%) questioned the capacity of the sector to make the vision a reality. They believed that investment at a national level was critical. As with respondents' comments on the development of a national framework, two types of resources were suggested? professional development for the adults working with the children, and financial support.

*Provide informal inservice on same [vision].*

*Children will learn from this [vision]. More resources needed before this is achievable.*

1 respondent noted the importance of government departments working together to make the vision a reality.

### **Key idea: Aims**

The consultative document proposes four aims for the *Framework for Early Learning*. These concern the development of all children as competent and confident learners, the promotion of parents'/guardians' role as educators, supporting adults in planning and providing appropriate learning opportunities for all children, and the endorsement of existing good practices.

**Table 3: Response to the aims**

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	59%	59
Agree	40%	40
Disagree	0%	0
Strongly disagree	1%	1

Valid cases=100

Mirroring the positive response to the vision for the framework, 99% of respondents agreed with the proposed aims. 55 respondents gave more feedback through their comments.

Two main themes were identified in respondents' comments. These were parents/guardians and resources, reflecting themes noted in respondents' feedback on previous key ideas.

Many respondents (38%) noted parents'/guardians' important role in their children's early learning and development. Analysis of these comments revealed two sub-themes. Some respondents (16%) highlighted the necessity to provide support to parents/guardians in their role as educators. The respondents suggested that this support might include information on strategies for parents/guardians to use in helping their children to learn. It might also include information for practitioners on how to work more closely with parents/guardians and involve them more in their children's learning.

*Additional support and education [needed] for parents in providing a solid base for learning in the early years.*

*While the significance of working in partnership with parents is recognised, guidance on how to do this in a meaningful way needs to be developed.*

The second sub-theme in respondents' comments relating to parents/guardians concerned the practicalities of the role of educator for many parents/guardians. Respondents saw this role as presenting challenge for some parents/guardians.

*The [framework's] aims are challenged by the need for parents to be absent for significant portions of their child's play and time due to economic demand.*

The second main theme in respondents' comments on the proposed aims for the framework related to resources. Many respondents (35%) expressed concerns regarding the realization of the aims. They believed that 'resourcing' was key to this process.

*Resources should be put in place that will enable these aims to become somewhat less aspirational and realizable.*

In analysing respondents' references to resources, two types of resources were highlighted. These resources also featured in the comments on other key ideas such as the vision. Some respondents (22%) commented on the importance of professional development to facilitate the implementation of the framework.

*Training is necessary for all practitioners and parents to work in partnership with one another.*



Financial assistance was the second type of resource requested by respondents (15%).

*I feel the aims are practical and achievable with the correct levels of funding.*

Other forms of support for the realisation of the framework’s aims noted by individual respondents included detailed information about how the framework would be implemented, and what the role of various organisations and agencies might be in this implementation process. Inter-agency and inter-departmental co-ordination and co-operation were noted by two respondents as being critical to the fulfilment of the aims.

**Key idea: Image of the child as a learner**

The consultative document presents the child as an active learner, interacting and engaging with people, objects and events. Most children display a tremendous drive and capacity to learn from birth (Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 1999). This is evident in their desire to become aware of and to understand the world, and everything in it. Playful interactions with appropriate involvement from others can support much learning which is self-initiated, fun, positive, and motivating. This image foregrounds the child’s own strengths and capacities as a learner and builds upon what he/she brings to the learning process.

**Table 3.4: Response to the image of the child as a learner**

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>53.1%</b>	<b>51</b>
Agree	41.7%	40
Disagree	4.2%	4
Strongly disagree	1%	1

Valid cases=96

95% of respondents agreed with the image of the child as a learner as presented in the consultative document. 59 respondents provided more detailed feedback in their comments.

Many respondents (44%) referred to the active role of the child as a learner. Analysis of the comments revealed what the respondents believed to be important factors in supporting the child as an active learner. A quarter of respondents (25%) referred to the child’s interactions with the adult. They considered these interactions important for extending and enriching learning. They emphasised the quality of these interactions whereby the adult and child shared responsibility for the learning.

*The interaction [with the adult] is very important as without it the child may not learn to the best of their ability.*

*By encouraging children to make own choices and decisions the adult shares power and control with the child.*

20% of respondents noted the importance of peer-peer interactions in supporting the child as an active learner. A further 10% believed play was central in a child’s learning.

*At this stage, children learn so much from their peers. They are particularly influenced by children slightly older as well.*

*Learning through play is the most positive and natural way for a child.*

A second major theme in respondents' comments on the image of the child as a learner was resources. As with their responses to previous key ideas, two types were identified. 10% of respondents referred to the importance of professional development in enabling adults to support children as active learners. 5% of respondents highlighted time as a central resource in making the image of the child a reality. They considered the shortage of time to be a challenge.

*...parents and many practitioners need help, training to ensure that children become active participants in their own learning.*

*You must be realistic in this idea [image]. You may have 16 children in a room. You can't have them all receiving one to one attention in adult child interactions.*

A third theme in respondents' comments related to children with special educational needs. 16% of respondents believed the image presented difficulties in the context of these children. In particular, they believed that the image was less realistic for children with specific learning disabilities. They also emphasised that access to appropriately resourced care and education services at an early stage was critical for these children.

*I agree [with the image] but for children with special educational needs, this is more difficult.*

*Children need to be able to access education. Those with special needs require special intervention from a range of professionals.*

A final theme identified in respondents' comments related to parents/guardians. 9% of respondents referred to parents/guardians and the challenges the image of the child posed for them. The respondents commented that the image was idealistic as the busy lifestyle of parents/guardians prevented them from spending quality time with their children, echoing responses to the aims articulated for the *Framework for Early Learning*.

*This is a false image. Parents are absent and have no quality time to interact with their children.*

A further challenge noted by respondents was the absence of information available to parents/guardians to support them in their role as early educators. This challenge was also raised by respondents in their feedback on other key ideas.

### **Key idea: Thematic framework**

The consultative document proposes a thematic framework which integrates learning in the various domains of children's development. The themes are: well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. This thematic approach to learning seeks to promote the holistic development of all children. Adopting a whole child perspective, which the thematic approach enables, helps to foreground the child and his/her abilities, and highlights the interconnectedness of all learning.

**Table 3.5: Response to a thematic framework**

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	39.2%	38
<b>Agree</b>	<b>55.7%</b>	<b>54</b>
Disagree	3.1%	3
Strongly disagree	2.1%	2

Valid cases=97

Almost 95% of respondents either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with the thematic approach for presenting learning in a national framework. In contrast to responses to previous key ideas, a higher percentage of respondents chose ‘agree’ than ‘strongly agree’. A total of 54 respondents gave additional comments. These comments focused on the desirability of the thematic approach. Respondents also suggested amendments or additions to the four themes.

Almost half of the respondents who added comments used these comments to welcome in varying degrees, the proposed thematic approach.

*I like the idea of learning through these themes and think it is very useful.*

*Before I read the document I was unsure about these themes, however having read it, I strongly agree. Well done!!*

There was a small number (12%) among those who provided comments who favoured a developmental domain approach, noting that many practitioners already used this approach. The curriculum areas in the Primary School Curriculum (1999a) are also based on developmental domains.

On the other hand, some respondents commented on the potential of a thematic approach to forge links across much curriculum guidance. Other benefits of a thematic framework noted by respondents included the potential to support a common language among those working with young children and the flexibility within themes enabling their adaptation and mediation at local level.

*Specific themes operated nationwide. All pre schools on same wavelength regarding themes as in national schools.*

*Creates focus for carer but not too restrictive so able to adapt for a group of children.*

1 respondent noted that the themes could have a positive influence on the lives of adults who work with children. He/she suggested that adults could learn much about looking after their own well-being, taking time for rest and relaxation:

*The themes suggested are excellent and would also present a positive way for parents to consider their own learning as parents while parenting.*

4 respondents expressed initial doubt regarding the capacity of a thematic approach to capture the full extent and range of children’s learning and development. However, the consultative document seems to have identified the links between themes and domains sufficiently to allay these concerns. For example:

*Felt some resistance at the beginning as a little vague, but do accept it when viewed in light of what developmental areas each theme covers.*

Some respondents (18%) also referred to the content of specific themes. For example, some felt that the child as a contributor, and a participant in learning, wasn’t captured in the themes. The addition of a fifth theme was suggested.

*While the four themes are clear "contribution of the child" has been omitted from the framework model.*

The importance of highlighting care throughout the themes was also a concern for some respondents (8%).

**Key idea: The adult’s role**

The consultative document emphasises the social nature of early learning:

*...we have begun to think again of the child as a social being—one who plays and talks with others, learns through interactions with parents/guardians and teachers...through social life, the child acquires a framework for integrating experience, and learning how to negotiate meaning...*

(Bruner and Haste, 1987, p.1).

The document presents a proactive role for the adult in enriching and extending the child’s learning. This role is premised on the understanding that *adults have the power to make a major difference to children’s lives and their development by what they offer to children and by how they behave towards them* (Lindon, 1993, p.75).

**Table 3.6: Response to the adult’s role**

<b>Level of agreement</b>	<b>Response rate</b>	<b>n</b>
<b>Strongly agree</b>	<b>59.6%</b>	<b>59</b>
Agree	35.4%	35
Disagree	4%	4
Strongly disagree	1%	1

Valid cases=99

The image of the adult’s role as outlined in the consultative document met with agreement by 95% of respondents. 60 respondents provided more detailed feedback on the role through their comments.

In expressing support for the adult’s role, many respondents (50%) drew attention to what they considered to be important aspects of this role:

- ‘matching’ learning opportunities with the child’s interests, strengths and needs
- sharing with children in their learning
- promoting play as a learning process
- scaffolding the child’s learning through skilful interventions
- offering praise and encouragement
- using the outdoor environment as a resource for learning.

The aspects are presented above in order of frequency in respondents’ comments beginning with the most frequently cited.

*Every child is different and comes from different cultures and backgrounds so everyone has different needs. Adults have to adopt their curriculum to suit.*

*Adults need to share control with children and be authentic with children.*

*Extremely important to have good quality interactions during play. Not just enough for the children to be looked after but their play has to be extended and developed by qualified staff.*

Resourcing was again a major theme in 27% of respondents' comments. Detailed analysis of the comments showed that 22% of respondents considered professional development to be a critical resource in enabling adults' to fulfil the role outlined for them in the consultative document.

*Adult training must be undertaken in conjunction with the development of a framework for early learning.*

5% of respondents cited financial assistance as an important resource in supporting adults in their role in early learning, while a further 3% referred to the shortage of time.

Parents/guardians emerged again as a key theme in 23% of respondents' comments on the adult's role. 2 main ideas were identified in the analysis of their comments. 10% of respondents highlighted parents'/guardians' role as their children's first and primary educators. A further 8% noted the necessity to provide supports such as training and information to parents/guardians to enable them to fulfil their role more effectively.

*Parents are the child's first teachers.*

*Adults [Parents] need ready access to both parenting programmes and to reflective sessions on their strengths and skills. Some of our parents have requested 'drop-in centres' and parenting information to be made available.*

Challenges in fulfilling the adult's role was the fourth main theme in respondents' comments with more than a fifth (22%) referring to these challenges. The challenge noted most often (10% of respondents) related to the uniqueness of each child and the difficulties this presented for the adult in responding to his/her individual needs.

*The challenge the adult faces in this role in supporting the child, encouraging and working on the child's ability, then planning for the next stage as all children differ. Each will have to be supported appropriately.*

7% of respondents commented on the challenge for the adult to facilitate and support learning rather than direct it. A further 3% cited the shortage of time as a significant challenge for adults in filling the role as articulated in the consultative document.

**Key idea: The role of assessment**

The consultative document highlights the valuable educational potential of assessment in supporting and extending children's early learning. Assessment provides the adult with the knowledge to recognise and celebrate the child's progress, and to plan for and support his/her learning in the most appropriate manner. Assessment should primarily be an informal routine part of day-to-day interactions and observations contributing to individually responsive learning experiences for children that are meaningful and relevant.

**Table 3.7: Response to the role of assessment**

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
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Strongly agree	46.4%	45
<b>Agree</b>	<b>48.5%</b>	<b>47</b>
Disagree	5.2%	5
Strongly disagree	0%	0

Valid cases=97

While the role of assessment received an overall positive reaction with 95% of respondents expressing agreement with it, it is interesting to note that slightly more responses were weighted towards 'agree' than 'strongly agree'. This, like the responses to the idea of a thematic framework, contrasted with responses to other key ideas.

68 respondents provided comments on the role of assessment as presented in the consultative document. This was the highest frequency of comments across all nine key ideas. Four major themes were identified in respondents' comments: the benefits of assessment, the challenges posed by assessment, professional development, and the term 'assessment'.

Many respondents (47%) noted the positive contribution assessment can make to supporting each child to realise his/her potential.

*You learn what stage a child is at, by assessing and observing you can see what stage they are at and plan to extend their learning.*

Expanding on this benefit of assessment, respondents focused on the importance of assessment in the identification of children with special educational needs. A fifth of respondents (21%) noted the necessity to provide these children with the necessary supports and resources to enable them to learn and to develop to their full potential.

*Assessment is important to detect any problems early, to nurture and be supportive in the development of the children.*

While 95% of respondents agreed with the role of assessment, many (43%) of those who provided comments drew attention to what they considered to be the challenges posed by assessment. These challenges included the danger of assessment leading to premature judgements about children, the time required to assess, the appropriateness of the assessment processes, and the possibility of assessment 'narrowing' learning for children.

A more detailed analysis of the data on the challenges of assessment showed that some respondents (13%) were wary of assessment leading to inaccurate judgements about children and their learning. Respondents feared that children would be labelled at an early age having a negative impact on their future learning.

*Unprofessional assessment can lead to situations where children are labelled at an early age, to the long term detriment of their development.*

In commenting on the time factor associated with assessment, some respondents (9%) noted the challenges that practitioners face in making time available for assessing and for recording information gleaned through assessment processes.

*Can be extremely time consuming and staff numbers cannot always accommodate this...Staff are stretched...they do not have time for observing each child and assessing his/her learning.*

6% of respondents referred to the appropriateness of assessment practices and tools. They stated that these should reflect the child’s developmental stage, and that they should lead to reliable and valid information about the child.

*...the assessment processes themselves must be developmentally appropriate, authentic, and reliable and validated...*

A further 4% of respondents commented on the danger of assessment ‘narrowing’ early learning for children. They believed that this was particularly inappropriate at this stage in a child’s life.

In keeping with feedback on other key ideas in the consultative document, 21% of respondents called for professional development, the third main theme in the comments on assessment.

*Assessment is a process which requires a high level of skill and training.*

Some respondents believed that this professional development was critical in helping adults to make accurate and informed assessments of children, and in helping them to use this information effectively in providing future learning opportunities.

The fourth major theme identified in respondents’ comments concerned the term ‘assessment’. 10% of respondents believed that the term was unhelpful in promoting the importance of assessment. They suggested that it presented assessment as being formal and somewhat negative.

*...I would prefer the word review. Assessment conjures up for me a measure of passing or failing...*

Respondents suggested alternative terms including ‘observation’, ‘monitoring’ and ‘review’.

**Key idea: Contents of the framework**

The consultative document proposes that the *Framework for Early Learning* should include various information such as its vision and aims, its philosophical and value base, the principles which underpin how children’s early learning should be supported, advice on assessing and planning for children’s learning, learning presented through themes, and guidance on developing partnerships between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners.

**Table 3.8: Response to the contents of the framework**

<b>Level of agreement</b>	<b>Response rate</b>	<b>n</b>
Strongly agree	44.8%	43
Agree	<b>53.1%</b>	<b>51</b>
Disagree	2.1%	2
Strongly disagree	0%	0

Valid cases=96

98% of respondents welcomed the suggested contents. A total of 49 respondents added additional comments. Three key themes addressed in the comments were the usefulness of the proposed contents, the appropriateness and accessibility of guidance for parents/guardians, and the supports required for the implementation of the framework.

Among the comments, some respondents (25%) noted reasons for their approval of the proposed contents. For example:

*I think the proposed contents would help me in providing appropriate learning experiences for all children. If these proposed contents are put in place for us in the very beginning it will work.*

However, some respondents emphasised the need to ensure that the content was developmentally appropriate according to the needs of the child. This would require the development of the framework and all its contents in a manner which reflected both theory and practice in early childhood settings. This mirrored respondents' comments on assessment practices and tools.

*I agree strongly with the suggested contents of the framework and would see the adult's role as central. However the content must be appropriate to the developmental age and stage of children 0-6 years. This means founding the content clearly in developmentally appropriate practice for this age group with specific strategies, based on child psychology and tested in the field.*

A number of comments (15%) focused on the accessibility of the framework, particularly for parents/guardians. This might involve developing materials specifically for parents/guardians:

*I would like to see provision made for parents and perspective parents to be taught how to support their children*

Others, however, felt that the needs of parents/guardians could be so diverse as to render the provision of a common set of materials ineffective:

*Parents from different backgrounds would have various expectations and therefore as a teacher [I feel it] would prove impossible to meet everyone's needs...*

Almost a third of the comments addressed concerns relating to the implementation of the proposed contents of the *Framework for Early Learning*. Some respondents called for information on the implementation process. This information should address not only the roles and responsibilities of adults working with children, but government departments, agencies and organisations.

*The framework needs to also contain methodologies on HOW it can be implemented, resourced, monitored and evaluated, especially for parents and family carers, as well as those working professionally in the area.*

This request echoed comments on other key ideas.

### **Key idea: A model for presenting the child's learning**

The consultative document proposes a model for presenting the child's learning in the framework. This model sees learning presented using four themes. Each theme has a set of aims. Each aim in turn is sub-divided into learning goals. Suggestions for learning experiences to assist the child in working towards these goals are also given. Some exemplars of good practices are included to demonstrate more clearly how the adult can support the individual child in his/her learning.

**Table 3.9: Response to the model for presenting the child’s learning**

<b>Level of agreement</b>	<b>Response rate</b>	<b>n</b>
Strongly agree	41.1%	39
<b>Agree</b>	<b>53.7%</b>	<b>51</b>
Disagree	2.1%	2
Strongly disagree	3.2%	3

Valid cases=95

As with other key ideas, there was a high level of agreement with the proposed model (95%). Like the responses to the ideas of a ‘thematic framework’ and the ‘role of assessment’, more respondents expressed ‘agreement’ than ‘strong agreement’. A total of 50 respondents added additional comments. For the most part, these comments dealt with the appropriateness of the proposed model, and the challenges involved in ensuring the model reflected the needs of parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners.

Many (25%) of the comments made some reference to the usefulness of the model.

*I don’t think there are any changes I would make to this model as I feel it covers all and is extremely useful.*

However, a small number of respondents (5%) indicated their opposition to the model. Some objected on the grounds that the model was vague and imprecise. For example:

*The suggested model is an ideological and metaphysical construct immune to testing and incapable of definitive validation.*

*Not very useful. It’s impractical and way too idealistic. It is unfounded and not in touch with reality. The situations in schools and creches are much different to those mentioned in the exemplars.*

Other respondents felt that the model was at odds with developmentally appropriate practices.

*...The use of the words “themes, aims and goals” within a framework for young children’s care, learning and development is developmentally inappropriate. I fear that the framework and its translation in practice will become goal orientated with suggested learning experiences becoming prescribed adult planned and directed learning activities...*

Over half of the comments referred to various issues to be considered in the development of the framework. These included the use of the model for planning, and the ability of all adults but in particular parents/guardians, to use it in supporting children in their learning.

*Guidance would be needed on how the framework would fit with daily activities, in other words, how the aims, goals, learning experiences would be reflected in the practitioner’s daily activities. Templates would be needed to show it works in reality.*

*The model sounds very good for children. My concerns as already stated are the education of parents to carry out this task.*

Respondents commented on what they perceived as being the strengths and weaknesses of the exemplars within the model. These comments referred to their content and usefulness.

*The four themes are all-embracing in terms of holistic development. However I feel that all adults even those working with small children do not fully understand the thematic concept. In this regard the exemplars need further attention and need to be more focused and specific.*

*Don't forget to keep to what the practitioner will be doing day to day such as giving the examples of everyday themes things that will help carry out the main aims.*

*Would it be useful to highlight strategies or specific techniques that the adults can use in the exemplar, especially when a more supportive role is appropriate for the adults?*

## **Conclusion**

Respondents expressed a high level of agreement with all nine key ideas presented in the consultative document. In providing comments on the different ideas, respondents frequently endorsed the content of the consultative document. They also made suggestions for, and raised some concerns regarding, the development and implementation of the *Framework for Early Learning*. The analysis of the response form data highlighted the recurrence of a number of themes across the nine key ideas. These themes included implementation, parents/guardians, professional development and resources.

Section 5 of the report considers the findings from the response forms in conjunction with those from the other consultation activities. It outlines some areas and issues which may require further consideration and discussion in moving forward in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.



## **SECTION 4: FINDINGS FROM REGIONAL SEMINARS, BRIEFINGS, WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS, INVITATIONAL SEMINAR**

### **Introduction**

This section of the report presents an analysis of findings from the regional seminars, the briefing meetings, the written submissions received, and the invitational seminar which was held in December 2004. As in section 3, these findings are presented according to the nine key ideas. The findings present a range of viewpoints, concerns and suggestions. Where broad agreement on ideas was identified, this is noted.

Like section 3 of the report, this section is presented in two parts.

- Part 1 provides an overview of the regional seminars and the briefing meetings in terms of the numbers organised, the geographical location of these and the numbers attending. Details of those organisations and individuals who made submissions are provided, and some detail is provided on the delegates who attended the invitational seminar.
- Part 2 describes the initial findings from the data generated and collected at the seminars and briefings, and from the submissions received. The findings are presented according to emerging key themes.

### **Analysis of findings**

#### **Part 1: Profile of participants**

##### **Regional seminars and briefing meetings**

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 present an overview of the regional seminars and the briefing meetings in terms of the number of events organised, and the number of attendees at each of these.

**Table 4.1: Regional seminars**

<b>Date (2004)</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Attendees</b>
08/06	Dublin	Red Cow Moran's Hotel	48
09/06	Galway	Galway Bay Hotel	45
10/06	Cork	Silver Springs Moran's Hotel	46
17/06 *	Carlow	Dolmen Hotel	42
22/06	Carrickmacross, Monaghan	Nuremore Hotel	16
<b>Total attendees</b>			<b>197</b>

\* This regional seminar was organised, hosted and funded by Carlow County Childcare Committee. Two NCCA staff led the seminar.

**Table 4.2: Briefing meetings**

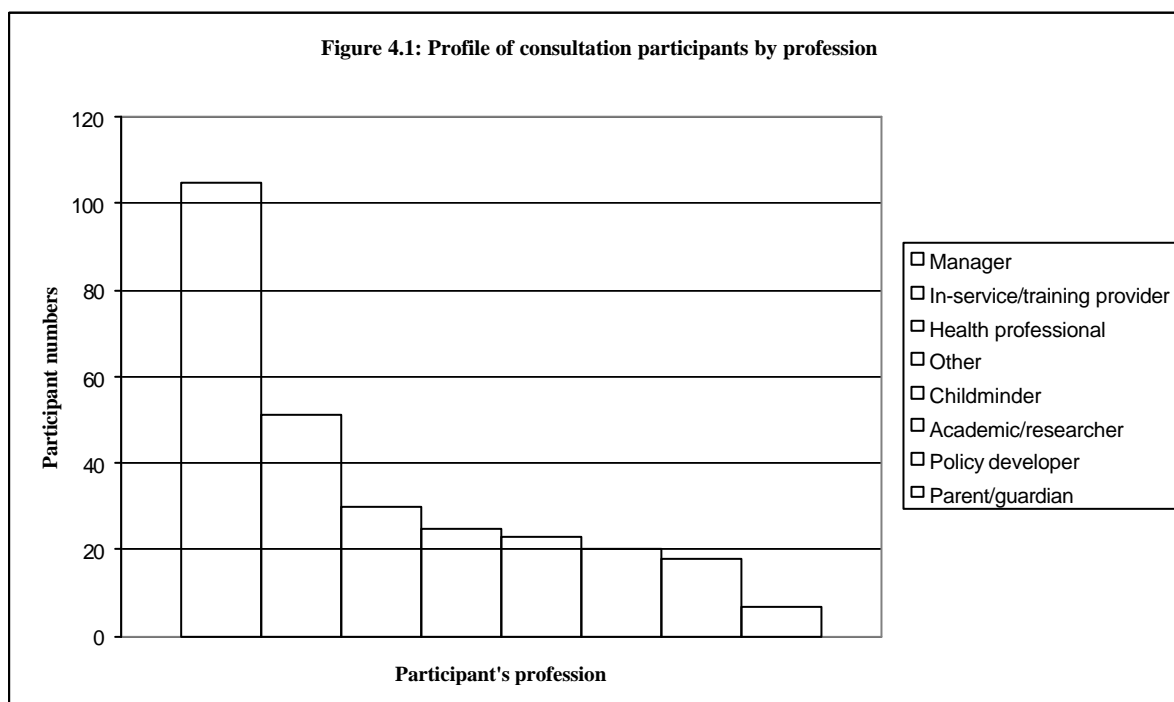
Date (2004)	Location	Organisation	Attendees
08/05	Limerick	Irish Preschool Playgroup Association (Annual conf.)	80* 21**
31/05	Leitrim	Border Counties Childcare Network	150* 18 **
07/06	Dublin	National Children's Nurseries Association	9
11/06	Tralee	Partnership Trá Lí	11
15/06	Dublin	Dublin Institute of Technology	38
21/06	Tipperary	North Tipperary County Childcare Committee	70
22/06	Waterford	Waterford City Childcare Committee	42
29/06	Dublin	Forbairt Naíonraí Teo	10
30/06	Dublin	Dublin Inner City Partnership, Inner City Childcare Network	17
13/07	Dublin	National Disability Authority	35
27/08	Galway	Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Central Executive Committee	32
06/09	Dublin	Ballymun Partnership	9
06/10	Dublin	Association of Montessori Teachers in Ireland (AMI)	3
<b>Total attendees</b>			<b>506***</b>

\* Conference

\*\* Workshop

\*\*\* In calculating the total number of attendees at the briefing meetings, the conference attendance numbers were used in the case of the conferences on the 8<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> May.

Figure 4.1 presents a summary of attendance data for the regional seminars and the briefing meetings.



## Written submissions

Table 4.3 lists the organisations and individuals who made submissions to the NCCA on its consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*. In compiling their submissions, many of the above organisations organised and facilitated consultations with their own members. In some instances, this involved funding and hosting regional meetings and focus group discussions. Information gleaned in this manner was then used in compiling the written submissions. The submissions may be accessed on the NCCA website at [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie).

**Table 4.3: Written submissions received**

<b>Organisations/individuals who made submissions</b>
Border Counties Childcare Network
Combat Poverty Agency
Cork Early Years Network, Cork City Partnership Ltd.
Development Co-operation Ireland (Dept. of Foreign Affairs)
Donegal County Childcare Committee Ltd.
Forbairt Naíonraí Teo
IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation***
Humanist Association of Ireland
Irish National Teachers' Organisation
LifeStart Donegal
Limerick City Childcare Committee
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
National Childminding Association of Ireland
National Children's Nurseries Association
National Children's Office
Pavee Point Travellers Centre
Planning and Evaluation – Children and Family Services
Pre School Inspection and Information Services, Child Care Directorate, Mid-Western Health Board
Trócaire
Waterford City and County Childcare Committees (joint submission)
Ms. Anne Hourihane, Clinical Nurse Specialist, Community Early Services, St. Vincent's Centre
Ms. Philomena Donnelly, Lecturer in Early Childhood Education, St. Patrick's College
Feedback from Border Counties Childcare Network*
Feedback from National Children's Nurseries Association*
<b>Total number of submissions received</b>
<b>23</b>

\* IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, the Border Counties Childcare Network and the National Children's Nurseries Association forwarded feedback from regional meetings with their members, in addition to making organisational submissions.

## Invitational seminar

The invitational seminar was held in Dublin Castle on December 9<sup>th</sup>. The NCCA offered 80 places by invitation in advance to various organisations in early childhood care and education. There were presentations by NCCA staff on the findings from the consultation to date. There were two keynote speakers: (1) Dr. Nóirín Hayes, DIT,

Rathmines whose address was entitled ‘The Language of Early Childhood Education’ (2) Dr. Francis Douglas, UCC who spoke on ‘The Power of Play.’ Nóirín Hayes spoke about the dichotomy between education and care and considered how the language used can illustrate this. Francis Douglas spoke about the centrality of play in children’s lives and in enabling the child to develop and learn physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially.

After each keynote address, participants broke into groups to discuss a number of questions related to the keynote presentations and the consultative document. There were four groups, each led by a facilitator. These questions were designed to pick up on ideas raised in the keynotes, and to prompt further discussion on the ideas in the consultative document. The proceedings concluded with a panel discussion. The panel comprised the keynote speakers and NCCA personnel, and it was chaired by Liz Dunphy (who was the chair of the Early Childhood Technical Working Group). Table 4.4 shows the profile of the 80 participants at the invitational seminar.

**Table 4.4 Profile of participants at the invitational seminar**

<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Representatives</b>
County Childcare Committees	23
Practitioners/teachers/lecturers	22
National organisations and networks	18
National policy developers	10
Health Boards	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>80</b>

## **Part 2: Analysis of data on nine key ideas**

### **Key idea: A national framework**

There was a strong welcome among those who participated at meetings or made a submission, for the development of a national framework to support children in their learning. While concerns relating to the framework were expressed, and challenges were identified, the sector highlighted a number of benefits pertaining to a national framework. These benefits related to the status and importance associated with learning in early childhood, the creation of a shared vision in supporting all children in their learning, and the potential to invigorate renewed thinking about professional development for those working in the sector. This endorsement for the framework was accompanied by the identification of a number of challenges.

#### Status of early learning

Many participants in the consultation drew attention to the potential of a national framework to raise the status of early learning in Ireland, and to make early learning a ‘*mainstream*’ issue. First and foremost, they considered the framework to be important in supporting the interests of children by valuing children as citizens in their own right as well as in terms of their future potential. Particular attention was given to the birth to three years age group in light of care traditionally being viewed

and accepted as being more important than learning for children of this age. Many participants considered a national framework to be an important step forward in raising public awareness of the first years in a child's life as the basis for all later learning, and for supporting adults in identifying and building on opportunities for learning at this stage in a child's life. It is interesting to note that while there was broad agreement on the importance of these first years for laying the foundations for later learning, a small number of participants questioned the use of the term 'learning' when referring to children from birth. In this case, some participants considered 'development' to be a more appropriate and all embracing term.

Linked to the potential of a national framework to increase the status of early learning, was a discussion on the benefits of early learning and the importance of raising public awareness of these. Some participants in the consultation drew attention to the importance of early learning from a social and economic perspective, as highlighted in the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy (2004).

### Improvement in quality

Participants in the consultation noted the potential of a national framework to support improvement in the quality of the provision for children's early learning. In particular, they highlighted the current diversity and fragmentation of early childhood care and education in Ireland, contributed to by the absence of a national framework.

There was strong agreement across the early childhood sector that a national framework would contribute to the creation of a shared vision and purpose for parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in supporting children in their early learning. This shared vision could be instrumental in encouraging and enabling adults to engage in more reflective practice, to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their practices and to identify the next steps in improving those practices. Additionally, participants highlighted that much good practice already exists across the early childhood sector. They stressed that it would be important for a national framework to take account of this and build on it. The framework could be an important vehicle for validating adults' work in supporting children in their early learning, and for sharing good practices. Such activities should lead to improved quality in provision for children's learning.

Some participants identified a national framework as an important benchmark for external monitoring in the context of improvement in quality.

### Continuity and progression

Participants in the consultation saw the development of a national framework as being critical in supporting a continuum of learning from birth to six years. They stressed the importance of creating continuity in children's learning through early childhood. Children may spend time in a variety of settings other than their own home in the first six years of life. This range of experiences, while having enormous potential to be enriching for the child's learning, can create discontinuities in learning. It was suggested that guidelines were required on how best the progression from one adult to another could be supported.



### Parents/guardians as primary educators

Parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners stressed the importance of supporting parents/guardians in their role as early educators. A national framework for early learning was considered to be an opportune way for disseminating information and advice to parents/guardians to inform them how they might support their children in learning through everyday routines and practices and through the provision of particular types of experiences during the early years. As outlined later in the context of the key ideas 'Aims' and 'Contents of the framework', consultation participants recognised the development and dissemination of relevant and accessible guidance for parents/guardians as being challenging.

### Professional development

A wide variety of professional development and training programmes is availed of by those working in the early childhood sector. Throughout the consultation, participants highlighted the fact that the sector, outside the formal education system, was operating from a low base of training. Participants emphasized the need to support the professional development of those currently working in the sector. They identified a national framework for early learning as an important lever for the professionalisation of the sector as a whole. They saw this focus on professional development involving activities such as reviewing training practices and programmes, mapping career pathways and ring-fencing appropriate resources to support adults in continuing their own learning in the field of early childhood education. Participants considered professional development to be pivotal to the implementation of the framework.

### Inclusive framework

There was broad agreement among participants that a national framework for early learning should not become a prescribed curriculum or '*definitive*'. There was concern regarding the potential of a national framework to '*direct*' learning in a way which could result in learning being narrowed and stunted. While participants considered it important to work towards common goals in supporting learning at this stage, they argued that a national framework should be sufficiently open, flexible and dynamic to cater for the uniqueness of each child. A framework of this nature could guide the adult in terms of what learning is important (dispositions, attitudes, skills and knowledge) and how that learning can be supported appropriately for each child, while respecting the integrity of each child as a person with particular strengths, abilities, interests and needs. This would ensure that decisions regarding learning activities and experiences were made in partnership between the adult and the child, enabling the curriculum to remain child-centred and child-led, whilst being guided by principles of good practice.

Participants also noted the necessity for a national framework to accommodate diversity. This diversity emanates from the eclectic mix of philosophies and traditions which inform adults in supporting children in their learning. There is also great diversity in respect of the types of settings children may spend time in during early childhood. An open, flexible framework based on principles of good practice could embrace such diversity.

It is important to recognize the importance that discussions or descriptions of the framework should not exclude any child. Thus, where the consultative document refers to diversity in terms of religion, it is important to also acknowledge that there are children who do not have any religion and that their cultural values and needs should also be recognised and met. References to diversity of religion should also include references to no religion for those children of no religion.

Consultation participants addressed the framework's content. They broadly agreed that a national framework for early learning should address a broad range of learning content. They considered it critical that this content was concerned with dispositions to be nurtured, attitudes and skills to be developed, and knowledge to be shared. Such content should be engaging and meaningful to children and relevant to their lives. In this way, the learning content of the framework would be developmentally appropriate for children as they progressed through early childhood.

### Implementation

Participants frequently identified sustained long-term investment in early childhood care and education as being pivotal to the implementation of the framework. Current funding levels across the sector and the short-term nature of much of that funding can impede the improvement of practice through, for example, a lack of physical resources and opportunities to engage in professional development. There were clear signals from participants that funding levels would need to be reviewed and increased.

A second concern expressed by participants relating to implementation focused on the external monitoring of the framework. There are currently different monitoring/inspection arrangements depending on the setting. Infant classes in primary schools are inspected by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science, while centre-based settings outside primary schools, are inspected by Pre-school Inspectors of the Department of Health and Children. Not only are different government departments involved in the inspection process, but there are different foci in the inspection process across the two departments. Practitioners working outside infant classrooms warned against the emergence of a dual inspection system whereby settings would be required to undergo two inspections, one by each government department.

A third concern raised regarding the implementation of the framework was the apparent lack of inter-agency and inter-departmental co-operation. Many government departments and agencies have a responsibility for aspects of early childhood care and education. There was broad agreement among participants in the consultation that inter-agency and inter-departmental co-operation was critical to a national framework being implemented successfully and ultimately making a positive contribution to children's experiences in early childhood. One group of participants believed that one agency or department should be established that would have responsibility for overseeing both the care and education of young children rather than having this responsibility split between two government departments as it exists at present.

## Language

There were some suggestions during the consultation that the title of the framework should be amended. Proposals made included; '*A Framework for Early Care and Development*', '*A Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education*' and '*A Framework for Early Childhood Care, Education and Learning*'. Participants considered these titles would reflect more accurately the needs of children from birth to six years. This suggestion highlights the care/education dichotomy and the learning/development debate, both of which emerged in the consultation in the context of other key ideas such as 'A thematic framework' and 'A model for presenting learning'. Some participants also believed that terminology such as '*education*' and '*curriculum*', which people may associate with formal schooling, should be avoided. It was also proposed that what is meant by learning should be defined and clarified.

### **Key idea: Vision**

Participants in the consultation supported the vision articulated for the framework. They considered it '*worthy*' and '*appropriate*' for a national framework concerned with children's learning from birth to six years. There was particular welcome for the centrality afforded to relationships and the environment as important contexts for early learning. Support for the vision nonetheless was coupled with concern for its realisation, a point expanded in detail below under the theme of 'Implementation'.

Not surprisingly, there was much overlap in participants' feedback on the two key ideas of a national framework and the vision presented for that framework. In particular, participants welcomed the focus on the early years as an important time for learning and developing as individuals. They also endorsed the emphasis the vision places on the individuality and uniqueness of each child.

## Inclusion

The importance of *all* children having positive and meaningful learning opportunities in early childhood featured frequently in discussions and submissions. The vision outlined for the framework places particular importance on enabling all children to realise their individual potential through purposeful and engaging experiences. Some participants in the consultation felt the consultative document was articulating a framework for the 'typically developing child'. Such a framework they suggested would not support families with children with certain learning disabilities. Similar concerns are reported in the findings on the idea of a national framework. Other participants suggested that the vision should embrace the principle of cultural diversity more explicitly. This was considered particularly important given Ireland's culturally diverse population, and the body of research documenting the early years as a critical time in laying the foundations for respecting and understanding difference as a natural part of life. Some participants considered the development of a national framework to provide an opportunity to focus on the development of skills among adults working with children which would enable the adults to challenge negative attitudes which children may experience in their daily lives.

### Equality of access

The consultative document presents a vision of all children being supported appropriately in their early learning. While there is universal provision for children from four years of age within infant classes in primary schools, this is not the case for children younger than this. Participants in the consultation argued that a national framework for the whole early childhood period should not be seen as being synonymous with equality of access to early education. This access should be the right of all children irrespective of geographical location, parents'/guardians' financial circumstances or the presence/absence of community or voluntary groups locally.

### Philosophical underpinning

The vision for the *Framework for Early Learning* is underpinned largely by an understanding of learning and development which places the adult in a critical role in enabling and supporting children to learn beyond their developmental capacities. Participants in the consultation requested that the NCCA would make the philosophical approach(es) underpinning the framework explicit. There were some suggestions that this should support the articulation of a set of overarching principles with these principles leading the development of the content of the framework. These principles, as well as drawing on theories of learning and development, would reflect the values of society and national aspirations for young learners. This suggestion received particular attention at the regional seminars and in the written submissions. Participants outlined how articulating the framework's guiding philosophy would provide insights into the importance of certain pedagogical approaches with children from birth to six years. Furthermore, it could contribute to the development of a shared understanding of how children learn in early childhood and how they can be supported in this learning.

### Implementation

Some participants requested the inclusion of an implementation plan in the framework itself. There was strong agreement that without clearly defined and agreed commitments at a national level coupled with the allocation of appropriate levels of resources and supports, the vision was likely to remain aspirational and idealistic.

Throughout the consultation, parents/guardians as a group received specific attention in the context of the realisation of the vision. Participants spoke of the challenges faced by many parents/guardians in fulfilling their role as early educators – challenges made more acute by poverty and low levels of educational attainment. There was broad agreement that if the vision was to be realised, significant investment in parenting programmes, family/home-based interventions, and the sharing of information and guidance would be required. This was seen as being particularly important in the context of children under three years of age as a large percentage of these children continue to spend most of their time in home settings.

## Refinement of vision

Suggestions for refining the vision for the framework included:

- adding references to ‘play’ and discovery’ which are critical in facilitating early learning.
- making explicit references to the interdependent nature of care and education in early childhood. Participants emphasised the importance of this both in the refinement of the vision and also throughout the framework as it is developed.
- referring to the two official languages of the State.
- incorporating a stronger emphasis on development education which would help to ensure a global and justice perspective in children’s early learning.
- amending the phrase ‘they develop as learners’ to ‘they develop as people’.

## **Key idea: Aims**

Similar to participants’ responses to the vision, there was broad agreement with and support for the four aims presented for the framework. Participants were particularly pleased with the importance accorded to parents/guardians as early educators. They also welcomed the explicit references to childminders as a group of adults who play a key role in supporting children in their early learning. This was considered important as many childminders may not ‘recognise’ themselves within an umbrella term such as ‘practitioners’. Participants also welcomed the acknowledgement of the range and body of good practices that currently exist in the early childhood sector in Ireland. They emphasised the importance of the *Framework for Early Learning* building on these.

## Accessibility

Throughout the consultation, participants expressed concern regarding the accessibility of the framework for parents/guardians. They saw this as highly challenging given that many children particularly those in the birth to three years age group spend most of their time in the home setting with parents/guardians or extended family. Making the framework accessible to parents/guardians was seen as critical if they are to be supported in their role as early educators and if children are to have purposeful, positive and enjoyable learning experiences from birth.

Accessibility of the framework for parents/guardians was explored as a two-pronged issue: suitability of content and dissemination of the framework. Many participants called on the NCCA to ensure that the language register of the framework and the types of information it might contain were suitable for parents/guardians. They recommended that the framework should distinguish between the qualitatively different roles played by parents/guardians and by childminders/practitioners in children’s lives. Participants also emphasised the importance of the framework in demonstrating the role of practitioners as being complementary to that of parents/guardians. Specific attention was given to the critical importance of the suitability of content in the framework for parents/guardians of children with special educational needs, where the level of the child’s need is experienced as challenging for families. Participants questioned how the framework might be disseminated to parents/guardians. They suggested exploring maternity hospitals and the public health



nurse network as potential distribution points, in conjunction with having the framework available on-line.

### Realisation of aims

In planning ahead for the implementation of the *Framework for Early Learning*, the National Children's Office suggested that the six operational principles of the National Children's Strategy (2000) might be considered in realising the aims of the framework. These principles comprise

- child-centred
- family oriented
- equitable
- inclusive
- action oriented
- integrated.

The consultative document identifies a number of principles of early learning drawn from an extensive body of research, which will inform and guide the development of the framework. The principles of the National Children's Strategy could provide a guiding framework for the implementation plan as requested by participants in the consultation.

### Continuity and consistency

The consultative document discusses the importance of ensuring links between the *Framework for Early Learning* and the Primary School Curriculum (1999a). These links should facilitate continuity and progression in children's learning across early childhood, helping children to learn to their true potential. Early Start and Infant teachers in particular noted the similarity between the aims presented for the framework and those of the Early Start Intervention Project (1998) and the Primary School Curriculum. They suggested that the aims articulated for the framework may be more relevant in the context of children aged from 3-6 years. This suggestion links with the concerns regarding how parents/guardians can be supported in their role as educators especially in the first three years of a child's life when many children do not attend out-of-home settings.

### Refinement of aims

As with the vision for the framework, participants in the consultation recommended some changes to the aims. These included:

- acknowledging the importance of adult-adult relationships in supporting children in their learning. Participants endorsed the prominence given to the child-adult relationship in the aims, but considered it necessary to include adult-adult relationships such as parent/guardian – childminder/practitioner relationships.
- understanding the child as a person living and learning within a community which shares a culture, language, heritage and traditions. Some participants suggested that it would be important for the framework's aims to refer to the importance of understanding, respecting and building on these 'home'

experiences enabling continuity and progression in the child's learning between home and out-of-home settings.

- emphasising the importance of good parenting skills in supporting early learning.

### **Key idea: Image of the child as a learner**

Participants in the consultation expressed strong agreement with the image of the child as an active learner, interacting and engaging with people, objects and events. There was broad agreement with a child-centred holistic approach to learning with the adult being a central partner in supporting and enriching this learning, and with play being used as a powerful context for enabling the learning. Participants stressed that in order to realise this image through the implementation of the framework, funding and supports would be necessary, both to purchase appropriate equipment and materials, and to accommodate the training of adults.

### Play

Play was frequently highlighted as a powerful and valuable context of early learning for children. In particular, participants indicated strong agreement about play's crucial role in enabling the child to develop and learn physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially. The benefits of play in helping children develop problem-solving skills, social skills, improving concentration, aiding physical development and assisting with language development were specifically mentioned. Play was also seen to allow children to get involved at whatever level is appropriate for them at any given time. However, it was stressed that these benefits could only be accrued from play that is interesting to the child. Learning was deemed more likely to occur if it is built upon the interests and strengths of the child, thus providing intrinsic motivation. As there are many different types of play, it was suggested that children should be afforded ample opportunity to experience a wide variety of forms of play, including reality play, free play and play using outdoor facilities. Some participants felt that outdoor play, in appropriate surroundings and under appropriate adult supervision, was not always given the priority it needs. Such play can provide children with opportunities to explore with a range of challenging equipment and to safely experience a degree of risk-taking. It was suggested that strategies should be developed so that carers would not be inhibited by the risks involved in facilitating play outdoors. It was proposed that issues of diversity could be explored through the medium of play, leading to situations that could develop young children's understanding of the unfairness of exclusion, inequalities and prejudice. Participants understood the child to derive most benefit from learning through play situations/scenarios structured by the adult, although it was suggested that a balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated play should be maintained. By planning for play, practitioners could ensure that a balanced play environment was available. This could involve the setting up of play-stations. It was strongly suggested that the level of play could be raised by the involvement of the adult at strategic moments and by the affirmation of the adult of play that is in progress. However, to be most effective it was deemed important that the adult involved should possess an awareness of the benefits of play to the development of the child. If adults knew the areas of learning they were supporting through various activities, then it was felt that they could ensure that there was breadth and balance in children's learning and that learning experiences were matched

to the age and stage of development of the child. Two strategies mentioned that could be used in supporting learning through play were; adults modelling play and peer mentoring, involving mixed age groupings.

It was noted that Vygotsky (1978) stressed the importance of symbolism in play as a means through which imagination and understanding can be developed. For that reason, Vygotsky regarded play as the leading source of development in early childhood.

Play situations/scenarios could also afford opportunities for assessing different types of learning outcomes through observation. Such observation could be used to inform practice and maximise learning opportunities. It was suggested that gathering information through play could enable the adult to facilitate children's learning according to their needs. It would also provide information that could be shared with parents

Side by side with this endorsement of play, participants emphasised the need for funding to ensure that the appropriate equipment and materials, for both indoor and outdoor activities, were available. The issues of space and numbers of children per adult currently limit opportunities for certain play. From the point of view of the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum, Early Start and infant teachers suggested that the value of play, and the various forms of play, should be communicated to parents/guardians, teachers and management in schools, as there can be an expectation of formal, structured learning, particularly in infant classes. . There was acknowledgement that although children may be supported to learn and to achieve certain goals through various activities, yet there was apprehension that if the language of 'outcomes' crept into the framework, there could be an onus on adults to help children reach certain standards by certain ages. It was felt that this might not reflect how children learn and develop in early childhood.

The recording of learning outcomes through the observation of play, the setting up of play situations, the supporting of learning outcomes through play and the need for practitioners to have time to share observations and plan, were listed as areas that could present challenges for the practitioner.

### The role of the adult

In exploring the image of the child as a learner, participants in the consultation showed strong support for the role of the adult as the more advanced learner in guiding, supporting and scaffolding the child's learning. The importance of the adult as a role model was emphasised as much learning in the 1-6 year age group comes through imitation of observed activity. It was felt that the role of parents/guardians as the primary educators and most important influence on the child's learning should be acknowledged. It was suggested in one submission that children's attitudes at an early age reflect the attitudes of the immediate world in which they are living rather than reflecting their own cognitive development. It was implied that adults, therefore, have a crucial role to play in fostering attitudes of understanding and tolerance, responsibility, inclusion, equality and justice and a respect for different and diverse views. The incorporation of a global and justice perspective within any early childhood education programme was promoted. Another important function of the adult was in assisting the child to learn from his/her experiences of life, both negative

and positive. Some negative experiences cannot be avoided and children need help to come to terms with and integrate these experiences into their lives and grow beyond them.

Several participants suggested that professional development for practitioners would be necessary to realise the image of the child as a learner as expressed in the consultative document. They highlighted the need to allocate appropriate resources for this professional development so that practitioners could be trained in how best to support children's learning through assessing and planning for individual needs. A suggestion made was that practitioners would be provided with in-service days following the launch of the *Framework for Early Learning*. It was also suggested that the modular content of childcare and education courses should be assessed and evaluated to ensure that practices being advocated are in line with the thinking within the consultative document. It was proposed that trainers/tutors/facilitators should hold relevant qualifications in Early Childhood Studies, supported by a background of experience in working with young children. Many participants in the consultation expressed concern that, at present, valuable and appropriate learning experiences are being lost, as a significant number of practitioners outside the formal education system do not document a planned, child-led curriculum.

A further suggestion by participants in the context of professional development concerned the training of '*specialists*'. In order to support the practitioner in accommodating the individuality of each child and in particular his/her creative development, a proposal emerged during the consultation for the deployment of practitioners who would be available to settings outside the formal education system for the purpose of facilitating learning in the creative arts area. These practitioners would also contribute to the professional development of the setting practitioners.

#### A child-centred holistic approach

Consultation participants supported the child-centredness of the image of the child as a learner. They strongly advocated that the child should be at the centre of all planning for his/her learning. While the adult will provide opportunities for learning, there was consensus that the child should lead the learning process. The child is particularly receptive to different kinds of learning at different times and he/she is unique with special interests, abilities or difficulties in different areas. Participants felt that the child's uniqueness as a person should lead to a differentiation in the approaches and equipment used, with an attempt being made to provide as broad a range of learning experiences as possible. Since children build on their experiences, it was deemed important by several participants that the acquisition of new concepts and skills should build on what the child already knows, thinks and understands, as this both consolidates and fosters learning. The value of assimilation time for children was also mentioned. Allowing children time to rest and relax is an important element in assimilating the knowledge acquired in any learning situation.

Some participants in the consultation suggested that the consultative document over-emphasised the child as an 'individual' and that the framework should give sufficient attention to the '*connectedness of the child within a dynamic, living system*'.

The importance of inter-agency and inter-departmental co-operation was raised again. This co-operation was highlighted as being particularly critical for children with special educational needs. The health and education sectors need to work and plan together to ensure a holistic and child-centred approach to supporting children with special educational needs in their early learning.

### ‘Content’ of early learning

Participants drew attention to particular types of early learning which they considered crucial: development of self-esteem, communication and interpersonal skills. They viewed the promotion of a healthy sense of self-esteem as forming the basis for children’s development of constructive relationships with others, and providing them with the confidence to reach out to new areas of knowledge, perspectives and ideas. Participants considered a child’s self-esteem would be best fostered where he/she experienced a sense of belonging, acceptance and security, and was participating in and contributing to what was going on around him/her. These experiences would lay the foundations for happiness and fulfilment in the present, in later education and in adult life.

Participants strongly agreed that children learn best through their actions and interactions with others. They supported the early development of children’s communication and interpersonal skills. The development of a range of skills that would assist children in initiating, maintaining and enjoying relationships with other children, in reading their immediate world and the wider world to which they are connected, in resolving conflict peacefully and in increasing their ability to take another’s point of view or empathise with others, was promoted. It was that this could be achieved through listening, speaking, negotiating and decision-making, as well as through non-verbal and creative forms of communication. Participants suggested that children should be actively and consciously encouraged to articulate their own feelings and to consider the feelings of others through role-play, games, simulation and circle group discussions. Childminders in particular, suggested that learning in the area of communication and interpersonal skills could be supported and enhanced by bringing children from infants to six years together for at least part of the day. They outlined how such mixed-age groupings are beneficial to all children in the group as they promote social interaction among children and are effective in enhancing language competence. Younger children can imitate the more mature social behaviour and social skills of the older children while the older children can empathise with, and demonstrate their competencies by helping younger children.

### **Key idea: The adult’s role**

The importance the consultative document places on the adult’s role in supporting children’s early learning was strongly supported during the consultation. The quality of the adult-child interactions has a profound impact on early learning, and on how children perceive themselves as learners. The child’s self-esteem can be closely related to that of the adult.

Participants noted that the discussion of the role of the adult in the document is quite ‘*broad*’ in places, and that more specific information would be necessary to support all those who work with children from birth to six years. Participants highlighted that



there might be many different interpretations of how pro-active the adult should be in particular learning situations/scenarios. Modelling behaviour for children might also be difficult in practice, where there were contextual factors such as resources and high adult:child ratios with which to contend.

### Implementation and professional development

In raising the status of early learning, and in highlighting the crucial role of the adult, the framework could help in the professionalisation of the sector according to consultation participants. However, they stressed that the current level of human and physical resources available in early childhood settings would result in differing capacities of adults to mediate the framework locally and to plan '*the specifics of the learning experiences*'.

Participants emphasised the range of adults (parents/guardians, childminders, practitioners and other professionals) who might use the framework. Early childhood care and education also attracts occasional workers, and some may not have opportunities to develop their expertise in working with children. On the other hand, others may have pursued professional courses to postgraduate level. Participants argued that the framework needs to offer an appropriate and accessible level of support to all these adults.

In light of the importance of the role of the adult, consultation participants felt that the framework should be informed by the work of training/in-service providers, for example, FÁS. The reference to progress in the area of professional development and accreditation in Section 1 of the consultative document was welcomed in this regard.

### Communication and language

The importance, which the consultative document places on high quality verbal exchanges for creating a rich language experience for the child, was welcomed. Participants noted the natural ability of children during their early years to learn more than one language. This presents a tremendous opportunity for language acquisition in Irish, but also constitutes a challenge in ensuring that children at this age have access to high quality exchanges by native or very good speakers. Some participants noted that the consultative document's discussion on the importance of interactions with babies and toddlers is a good way to begin to look at curriculum in a non-threatening way. High quality interactions with adults are crucial for children under three years, where children have little or no formal language. Listening was also deemed an important aspect of communication. With regard to second language learning, one submission cited the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who suggest that learning is about participation in a 'community of practice.' Opportunities to hear, understand and use a second language should be maximised as they occur, for example within the context of play and in meaningful, active contexts.

### Enabling children

The role of the adult in enabling and empowering the child to have a greater role in his/her own learning is of particular importance considering how important self-motivation is for life-long learning. The discussion in the consultative document on

the cultivation of dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, fairness, resilience and creativity was welcomed during the consultation. There was discussion on the adult as a reflective practitioner, who models the transfer of learning from one situation to another. In doing so, he/she works to promote reflection and critical thinking with young children and fosters positive disposition towards life long learning.

While participants considered the role of the adult to be well explored and discussed in the consultative document, they felt that more attention should be afforded to the role of other children, especially from mixed-age groupings, in supporting children to learn. As mentioned earlier in the discussion on the idea of 'The image of the child as a learner', participants and especially childminders, highlighted the importance of bringing babies, toddlers and young children together. They argued that such practice reaped benefits for all children, but most particularly children showing resentment, aggression, stress, over-competitiveness or excessive shyness.

### Adults working together

The consultative document recognises the importance of close and supportive relationships between all the adults who work with children. The consultation highlighted strong support for this partnership approach. The key worker system in particular received much support. Discussion also took place on the importance of continuity between such out-of-home supports. For example, it was stressed that support services, such as any form of therapy, for children whose first language was Irish, would be available through the medium of Irish.

### Mediation for parents/guardians

Consultation participants recommended that the framework would seek as much as possible to encourage parental involvement in children's learning, both in the home and in out-of-home settings. However, participants were concerned about how parents/guardians would be enabled to use, and engage with the framework. Some felt the consultative document was not appealing to some parents/guardians and concluded that the same problem could apply to the framework itself.

Workshops, local fora and networks on early learning involving parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners were suggested as means of informing parents/guardians of their role as early educators and how they could fulfil this role. These activities would enable parents/guardians to engage more with education generally, including the Primary School Curriculum. Many participants also saw the framework as being helpful in raising parents'/guardians' awareness of the importance of play and assessment in supporting children in their learning.

## **Key idea: Thematic framework**

Participants in the consultation broadly agreed with the development of a national framework using a thematic approach to presenting children's learning. They highlighted the importance of, and need to raise public awareness of the thematic approach and its benefits for children. As with participants' feedback on other key ideas, the broad agreement was accompanied by a number of recommendations for moving forward in developing the framework.

### Themes and developmental domains

Participants expressed broad welcome for adopting a thematic approach in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. They were confident that the thematic approach would help to foreground the child and his/her abilities, and to highlight the interconnectedness of all learning. The themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking) would help articulate the nature and scope of children's learning, and raise awareness of children as learners from birth. There were suggestions that present considerations of the physical building, of health and safety and other structural issues mean that the child as a person can often be overlooked.

While there was broad agreement with developing a thematic framework, the consultation highlighted a need for more discussion on the rationale for a thematic approach as opposed to a developmental domain approach. Participants indicated concern that a thematic approach, unlike a developmental domain approach, would be subject to multiple interpretations given its more 'open' nature. Some participants suggested that the four themes proposed for the framework might be too broad to be useful for children with special educational needs such as intellectual disability.

Participants highlighted that many childminders and practitioners already use a developmental domain approach in their work with children. This approach is also adopted in early childhood curriculum guidance in Northern Ireland. This has particular relevance for early childhood settings outside the formal education system and located in border counties, as a number of these currently use the guidance from Northern Ireland in their work with children. Participants also drew attention to the fact that the curriculum areas in the Primary School Curriculum are grounded in developmental domains. Given this predominance of the developmental domain model, some participants considered it would be easier for adults to use the framework if it were based on developmental domains rather than themes. On the other hand, it was recognised that a thematic approach would offer great potential for forging links across curriculum guidance and introducing a greater level of coherence and connectedness in children's early learning.

Nonetheless, articulating the connections between the framework and the infant section of the Primary School Curriculum was seen as a challenge. Clear links between themes and domains of development would help. It was suggested that explicit links between the framework and the strands within the different curriculum areas in the Primary School Curriculum could help in this regard. Otherwise the positive impact of the framework may not be realized as it could be considered to be somewhat divorced from the primary school.

Participants also expressed uncertainty regarding the interface between the framework's themes and curriculum guidance currently used outside the formal education system. They highlighted the importance of the sector being assured that the framework would not replace existing curriculum materials but would provide another way of planning for children's learning, and in this way link with guidance based on developmental domains. Participants considered it important that developmental domains were not presented as being less useful than themes.

### Diversity

The importance of the framework's themes embracing human diversity was noted throughout the consultation. Because the themes foreground the child and his/her individuality, children's differing experiences of early childhood in Ireland in terms of belonging to identifiable groups in society, (e.g., ability, language, ethnicity) can be more effectively conveyed. Being child-centred, participants saw the thematic approach as being potentially helpful in transcending barriers that children from different cultural backgrounds may experience within a developmental domain or subject based approach to learning.

It was noted that the thematic approach was compatible with development education in that it lends itself to incorporating a global and justice perspective. There was welcome for the importance placed on the provision of opportunities for discouraging stereotypical beliefs and attitudes and also for fostering inclusion, equality and positive attitudes towards difference. The feedback also raised the importance of the role of the adult in this regard. It was noted that while children aged three can associate positive or negative attitudes towards difference, this does not reflect their cognitive ability but rather reflects the attitudes of those around them.

One submission discussed the importance of activism (as developed in Derman-Sparks, 1989) as a sound basis for working with young children. Activism supports the educator to appropriately explore and challenge attitudes thus expanding children's concept of fairness and feelings of empathy, fostering critical thinking and enabling them to gain tools (language/strategies) and confidence to challenge discriminatory behaviour and attitudes.

### Identification and configuration of themes

Participants in the consultation called for further consideration to be given to the framework's themes. There was some concern about the use of the word 'theme' and an alternative word would be preferred by some. The word 'theme' is already used to refer to topic work. During the consultation, it also became increasingly evident that there were differing understandings about what each theme, as currently titled, might be expected to contain. Additionally, for some participants, the four themes represent two qualitatively different types. Children's well-being and within that, their identity and belonging, could be viewed as outcomes, while communication and exploring and thinking contribute to these outcomes. Well-being could also be interpreted as an over-arching concept, which subsumes the other three themes.

Some participants thought the four proposed themes were limiting, and might '*pin you down.*' The nine dimensions of the National Children's Strategy (2000) were seen to provide greater scope in guiding children in their learning. Some participants also considered the themes to be adult-led, as opposed to being child-led.

The consultation resulted in many suggestions for further developing and expanding the four themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication and exploring and thinking. There were calls for additions to be made to the number and/or content of the themes. These additions should emphasise the input or contribution of the child to the learning programme, to the setting and to the relationships, through which he/she learns. Some participants felt that the child as a contributor, as someone who can love and do things, wasn't captured in the themes as presented in the consultative document. Contribution and participation are the means by which children learn most, and their inclusion would also acknowledge the importance of imitation in a child's learning. Some participants also felt that care was not sufficiently visible in the presentation of the themes in the consultative document. Given the centrality of care in children's early years, there was strong agreement that this needed to be embedded in the framework.

The importance the consultative document places on language as a vehicle for learning, which permeates relationships and play was welcomed. Participants in the consultation discussed the child as a language learner, particularly in the context of the child's plurilingual development in a state which is officially bilingual. It was suggested that immersion education and second language acquisition could perhaps be integrated more effectively in the framework's themes and/or throughout the framework's contents.

The arts also featured strongly in discussions on the framework's themes. The Reggio Emilia approach to early learning, which has attracted world acclaim, was cited by participants as a good example where the arts are placed at the centre of early childhood practice. Participants requested greater attention be given to the arts through reviewing the themes, or by incorporating them across the framework.

A number of participants proposed that 'creativity' should be incorporated, either as a fifth theme or by being incorporated into an existing theme, e.g. the theme 'Exploring and thinking' could be expanded and renamed 'Exploring, creating and thinking'.

It was also suggested that both *physical* and *emotional* well-being should be included under the theme of 'Well-being'. Peer group interaction, including mixed-age groupings, was considered vital for well-being.

Other recommendations made regarding the framework's themes included:

- the inclusion of self-expression
- the omission of identity
- the amalgamation of well-being and belonging
- the inclusion of a more explicit focus on children's actual ability and potential ability to think in the abstract, and how this thinking can be encouraged.
- the inclusion of social well-being through warm consistent relationships

- the importance of not considering exploring and thinking solely within the cognitive domain. It should reflect the holistic nature of learning and include physical, social and emotional domains.

### Implementation

Throughout the consultation participants working outside the formal education system, noted that practitioners may not have the necessary skills, and knowledge to engage in curriculum development locally. This means that the framework and its themes may not be supported or mediated through local curriculum development. Participants highlighted the implications of this for training and professional development, to ensure a readiness to fully realise the potential for early learning which children show, and which is highlighted through the framework's themes.

### **Key idea: The role of assessment**

Assessment generated considerable discussion during the consultation. Participants across the early childhood sector indicated broad agreement with the importance the consultative document places on assessing children's early learning, and the role of assessment in planning and providing for future learning. Primarily, they identified assessment as an important tool in enhancing learning and ensuring it is meaningful for each child.

Many participants, particularly those working outside the formal education system, highlighted concerns about the current capacity of the early childhood sector to engage in assessment as articulated in the consultative document. They argued that significant environmental changes would be necessary to support adults in their work in assessing children's learning in a way which was appropriate at this stage in a child's life. These are discussed below under various theme headings.

### Child-centred assessment

Many participants in the consultation reflected on the emphasis the consultative document places on assessment for empowering the child as a learner. By focusing on the child's strengths, abilities and progress and building on these, assessment can be experienced as something positive and affirmative. Participants drew attention to the importance of assessing children's learning in context. The consultative document highlights the necessity to consider each child's social, cultural and physical environments and the impact these have on what, when and how the child learns. Participants agreed with this.

The importance of assessment being child-centred was also raised in the context of the appropriateness of assessment practices, processes and tools. Participants highlighted reservations about the suitability of formal assessment of a child's learning in early childhood. These reservations were shared across the sector. Participants were concerned about the possibility of the *Framework for Early Learning* as a national framework endorsing formal assessment, and cautioned against this. They also warned that assessment should not lead to a focus on learning outcomes. Such a development would have the potential to narrow learning for the child by placing pressure on adults to focus on certain learning at certain stages in a child's early years. Consultation participants strongly agreed that assessment needed



to be informal and reflect the child's particular stage of development, resulting in more reliable information to inform planning for further learning.

There was strong agreement that assessment in early childhood should be informal and ongoing recognising the diversity of learners and supporting children as they learn at different paces and in different ways. Participants identified narration and observation as critical tools in facilitating reliable assessments of children's early learning. Childminders, professionals supporting parents/guardians in their role as early educators, and professionals working in special education, made specific reference to the usefulness of the developmental milestone model in supporting the assessment process. This was considered to be particularly helpful for parents/guardians in alerting them at an early stage to potential difficulties and/or delays experienced by their children. Infant teachers were particularly concerned about the current unavailability of appropriate profiling assessment tools for use with young children.

### Early identification

Participants welcomed the emphasis the consultative document places on the early identification of children with special educational needs, and recognised the important role of assessment in facilitating this. They emphasised the importance of training in equipping them with appropriate intervention strategies to support the child in his/her learning. Some participants were optimistic that the development of practitioners' expertise in early assessment would result in fewer children with special needs being identified 'late'. Other participants and particularly those outside the formal education system, expressed concern that unless necessary resources and professional services were made more readily available, early identification would have minimal impact on supporting these children in their learning. In expanding on this point, participants drew attention once again to the necessity for inter-departmental co-operation where children require access to services and expertise within different government departments, primarily the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Health and Children. Some participants highlighted how current co-operation mechanisms and structures can result in children with special educational needs experiencing discontinuity in their learning. For example, when a child who qualifies for a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) funded by the local Health Board makes the transition to the formal education system the SNA typically does not transfer with the child. Practitioners highlighted the upset and anxiety this potentially causes for the child and his/her family.

### Improvement in quality

The theme of improvement in quality through assessment emerged through the consultation. Firstly, participants drew attention to the important role of assessment in ensuring continuity and progression in children's learning, and ensuring that learning is meaningful and relevant to each child. Secondly, participants identified the focus on assessment within a national framework as being an important step forward in facilitating the development of a common language and understanding of assessment in early childhood. This should lead to the promotion of good practices reflecting international thinking and research on children's early learning. Participants endorsed the importance of reflective practice in the continuous improvement of the quality of

provision for children's learning. To support this, participants suggested that training in self-evaluation would be beneficial.

### Time

Time was a recurring theme in discussions and submissions. Within this theme, participants drew attention to two main challenges. There was strong consensus about the potential demand assessment placed on practitioners' time, in terms of the overall time required for assessment to be carried out effectively, and the time necessary to assess each child individually. There was strong agreement that the time demand generated by assessment could impact negatively on the time available for child-adult interactions. Many participants in the consultation highlighted that this was exacerbated by current adult: child ratios in early childhood settings. This environmental constraint was of particular concern for infant teachers who referred to the large class sizes with which they were working. Finding non-contact time essential for recording, discussing assessment information with colleagues and/or other professionals such as therapists and public health nurses, and reflective practice was identified as a further challenge. Practitioners working in settings outside the formal education system made many references to the issue of remuneration for this work.

### Assessment expertise

With the exception of infant teachers, participants in the consultation process continually drew attention to the lack of training in assessment which currently exists in the early childhood sector. Ongoing training is critical to enable childminders and practitioners to assess children's learning in an appropriate manner and to use the information gleaned to inform future learning. Participants argued that current funding levels militate against building assessment expertise within staffs. Without appropriate training, participants viewed the reliability of assessment information as being an issue, particularly in the context of sharing it with parents/guardians. Participants, especially those attending the regional seminars, were concerned that a lack of assessment expertise would contribute to the 'labelling' of children which could have very significant negative consequences for these children's experiences as young learners.

While a need for professional development was clearly identified during the consultation, there were also requests for the provision of detailed guidance on the assessment process and the role of the practitioner in this process. Such guidance could be included in the framework itself.

### Term 'assessment'

The term 'assessment' presented difficulty for many participants in the consultation. They considered the term to have negative connotations of testing, and measuring a child's early learning against pre-determined attainment levels. There was strong consensus that this would not reflect the dynamic nature of learning in the early years of a child's life. Participants suggested replacing the term 'assessment' with '*observation*' or '*evaluation*' which they considered would reflect more accurately the functions and processes of early assessment. Such terms would also be more

acceptable particularly to parents/guardians and to practitioners in settings other than infant classes.

### A collaborative process

Assessment is a complex process and particularly so in early childhood given the complexity of the learning process at this stage. Throughout the consultation, participants stressed the importance of assessment being understood and experienced as a collaborative process involving the child, the parent/guardian, the childminder/practitioner, and other relevant professionals. This partnership enables the sharing of information and insights from different perspectives greatly enriching and informing the assessment process. Participants made specific reference to the role children can play as assessors of their own learning, and the positive contribution this can make to their empowerment as learners.

Childminders and practitioners working outside the formal education system frequently referred to the role and involvement of parents/guardians in the assessment process. In particular, they posed questions about

- the types of information to be shared with parents/guardians
- the reliability of assessment information being shared with parents/guardians given practitioners' current levels of assessment expertise (as discussed earlier).

### Documentation

Throughout the consultation, participants and especially those working outside the formal education system posed a number of questions regarding access to and the use of assessment documentation. These questions concerned

- the purposes of documented assessment information and the likelihood of it being used for external monitoring purposes
- the audiences for assessment documentation
- the confidentiality of assessment information in the context of the Freedom of Information Act
- the transfer of documentation with the child as he/she makes the transition to the formal education system, and the potential use of this information to 'stream' children.

The consultative document emphasises the importance of using assessment information to develop an individual education plan for children with special educational needs. Childminders in the consultation drew attention to the importance of these plans for every child.

The National Children's Office recommended the use of the nine inter-linked dimensions expressed in the National Children's Strategy (2000) as a guide for adults in assessing children's early learning. These dimensions comprise physical and mental well-being, emotional and behavioural well-being, intellectual capacity, spiritual and moral well-being, identity, self-care, family relationships, social and peer relationships, and social presentation.

## **Key idea: Contents of the framework**

The consultation showed strong support in the early childhood sector for the contents as outlined in the consultative document, which would help sustain and create a wealth of good practices in supporting children in their early learning. In particular, the principles were seen as being helpful to practitioners in using the *Framework for Early Learning* to develop a curriculum tailored to the needs of the children with whom they work, and their own needs as practitioners. A number of other themes emerged from the data.

### Advice on assessing learning

Building on the feedback on the key idea of ‘The role of assessment’, consultation participants welcomed the inclusion of advice on assessment in the framework. Participants outside the formal education system specifically requested that this advice would show

- how assessment can be integrated more easily within settings
- how relationships and play can provide key contexts for assessment (as well as providing key contexts for learning)
- how the contributions of different people such as parents/guardians, other children, and the child himself/herself are important and can be encouraged
- how recording can be used to celebrate achievement and to identify strengths, interests, learning styles and challenges
- how written, pictorial and audio records of children’s learning can be created and used.

As outlined earlier, there was also support especially among childminders, for exploring the potential of an individual education plan for supporting all children in their learning.

### Interpretation

Achieving the correct balance between providing broad parameters on the one hand and providing specifics that would be useful in guiding adults in their work with children emerged as a theme in exploring the proposed contents of the framework. Some consultation participants noted that the adoption of a broad, descriptive approach (as is being proposed) rather than a prescriptive approach may result in the contents of the framework being open to differing interpretations, lacking definition, and consequently being ineffective as a means of improving children’s experiences.

### Articulation of the philosophical underpinning

The definitions provided in the consultative document for key concepts (either in the body of the text or in the glossary) was welcomed. However, participants noted that there was a need in some cases to acknowledge to a greater degree the philosophy(ies) underpinning particular definitions. For example, it was suggested that defining developmentally appropriate practice as practice which reflects a child’s particular age and stage of development suggests a Piagetian understanding of children, and should be acknowledged as such, if that is the case. Similarly, the framework should be accompanied by a stated philosophical approach or indeed, approaches, as

appropriate. Such a clearer articulation, it was felt, would support more effective implementation of the framework.

### Contextualisation

It was frequently noted during the consultation that the framework's contents will need to be rooted in current best practices in the early childhood sector. This will involve developing closer links with settings for the ongoing development of the framework.

As reported earlier, participants referred to the importance of the framework's contents reflecting and accommodating the reality of children's current experiences of early childhood. They gave particular attention to Ireland's multi-cultural society and the ensuing importance of the framework drawing on the Anti-Bias approach to curriculum development. Development education was also seen as having much to offer to the framework as it emphasises interconnectedness of people, equality, and the role of the individual as a change agent in supporting justice and democracy.

### Differentiated presentation

Given the range of people involved in supporting children in their early learning, many participants in the consultation felt that there was a need to differentiate the contents of the framework and their presentation. This would require differentiated materials for specific groups, such as parents/guardians and health personnel. There was a recommendation for the use of alternative media in disseminating and in publishing the framework, for example, user-friendly leaflets and videos. Participants saw this differentiation as being critical to cater for the different roles and needs of those responsible for supporting early learning.

### **Key idea: A model for presenting the child's learning**

Like the responses to the other eight key ideas, participants in the consultation indicated broad agreement with the proposed model for presenting the child's learning in the framework. In providing feedback on the model, many participants offered suggestions for further developing the model.

### Goals and learning experiences

Participants in the consultation showed broad welcome for the proposed model (themes, aims, learning goals, suggestions for learning activities/experiences, learning exemplars). They identified a number of benefits in presenting learning using goals and learning experiences. Learning goals guide adults in terms of what they should and could be focusing on in children's early learning. Goals based on themes rather than developmental domains would convey very effectively the nature of learning as being connected and dynamic rather than compartmentalized and linear. The framework's inclusion of suggestions for learning experiences would show that a range of strategies and opportunities can be used to enrich learning for each child.

However, participants expressed concern about the implementation and interpretation of the model, given the current diversity in terms of expertise and experience among

those who will ultimately be using the framework. This concern was greatest with regard to the learning goals. With limited knowledge, it was feared that some adults could be directed by the learning goals alone (as opposed to the learning goals in conjunction with the suggestions for learning activities, and the exemplars), and in so doing, could actually relegate the importance of play and a child-centred approach in early learning.

Participants suggested that the term 'goal' could be open to multiple interpretations. Some adults may view these goals as prescriptive targets which the child must reach by a certain time, resulting in the framework being led by these goals and the needs of the child being subordinated. Suggested alternatives included '*potential learning*' or '*enabling objectives*'.

### A 'practical' framework

In order to implement the themes as proposed in the framework document, it was felt that clarification of what best practice actually is should be included, and that specific and concrete examples of children's learning and of how the theory can be translated into practice are required. Participants recommended that these examples indicate explicitly how children's learning can be extended and enriched on a day-to-day basis. They also highlighted the need for both guidance and training on *how* the framework would inform daily activities, in other words, how the aims, learning goals and suggestions for learning experiences would be reflected in the adult's daily activities, routines and practices. Without such guidance, many participants felt the framework's usefulness to those working with children, would be limited.

There were also requests for greater exemplification of each of the framework's themes. Participants suggested that this could involve the inclusion of topics and activities, potential learning outcomes, recommendations for adult participation in activities, and guidelines for assessing progress in children's learning within each theme. Practical supports such as sample planning templates and planning exemplars addressing short-term and long-term planning would be needed to show how the aims and learning goals could be translated into practice.

To make the framework a 'living document,' one proposal was that it should take the form of a ring binder so that additional material could be added or removed. By having the document available on-line, it would be accessible to a large number of people, including parents.

### Learning and development

The consultation drew attention to the philosophical underpinning of the framework. As discussed earlier in the context of the key idea of 'A national framework', participants called for the central guiding philosophy(ies) to be made explicit in the *Framework for Early Learning*. There was a suggestion that the consultative document doesn't adequately set out the differences between constructivism, as demonstrated by Piaget, and social constructivism, as demonstrated by Vygotsky. This is especially important in how learning and development are presented and understood. It was argued that a more precise differentiation between learning and development would be needed in the development of the framework. Such



differentiation would have implications for how learning is presented in the proposed model of aims, goals and suggestions for activities.

It was proposed that cultural diversity and the importance of valuing difference should be given more prominence and that the pictorial representations of the themes included in the framework should reflect diversity in all its manifestations. For instance, children of different skin colours should be pictured learning *together* and men, in a caring role, should also be visible in the framework.

### Implementation

As highlighted in the reportage on other key ideas, there were many questions during the consultation regarding the implementation and monitoring of the framework. These questions were posed mainly by those working outside the formal education system. There was frequent reference to the resource implications of implementation in terms of physical resources, human resources and time. Greater investment in human resources was seen as being particularly important to embed the centrality of play, relationships and assessment in supporting children in their early learning. Participants were also concerned as to how the monitoring would 'fit' with existing monitoring such as that undertaken by pre-school inspectors, who work with sessional services, full-day care services, childminding services and drop-in centres.

Continuing the theme of implementation, participants also raised the interface between the *Framework for Early Learning* and the National Framework for Quality, which is currently being developed by the CECDE, as a discussion point. Given the difficulties involved in evaluating quality, they recommended that the framework developed by the NCCA would include guidance on how quality in diversity can be promoted.

### Development of the framework

The work of the NCCA and the Early Childhood Technical Working Group in developing the consultative document was commended throughout the consultation. Many participants suggested that future work in developing the framework should involve a wider representation of the early childhood sector, for example, the Quality and Training Sub-groups of City and County Childcare Committees. These groups should also play a key role in the promotion of the framework on its completion. Ongoing development of the framework should also be shared with those working directly with children '*on the ground*'. Many participants also emphasised the importance of involving those in the health sector and particularly those involved in the areas of public health and child and family services. Health Boards issue guidelines to parents/guardians on children's early learning and development which address areas such as relationships and play. The Health Boards are also charged with pre-school inspections. Hence, participants identified co-operation with and involvement of the health sector as being critical.

Finally, participants repeatedly called for ongoing consultation rather than terminal consultation in proceeding with the development of the framework.

## Conclusion

Mirroring the findings from the response form data, participants in the regional seminars and briefing meetings, and those who participated via the written submissions, indicated a high level of agreement with all nine key ideas. Like the respondents to the response forms, participants in these latter three activities indicated strong support for much of the thinking presented in the consultative document. They also elaborated on what they considered to be the key challenges in implementing the *Framework for Early Learning*. The seminars, briefings and written submissions provided participants with opportunities to present and to discuss their concerns in detail, and to explore and to suggest possible strategies for addressing these concerns. Like the findings from the response forms, there were a number of recurring themes in the data gathered through the seminars, briefings and submissions. These again included implementation, parents/guardians and resources.

Drawing on the findings across all the completed consultation activities, section 5 of the report signposts some areas and issues which require further consideration and discussion in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.



## **SECTION 5: PRELIMINARY SIGN-POSTS FOR ONGOING WORK**

### **Implications of the findings for NCCA**

The findings presented in Sections 3 and 4 of this report show that participants in the consultation expressed a high level of agreement with the nine key ideas in the consultative document. The consultation findings also identified a number of issues which require further consideration in the development of the framework. These include:

#### **Vision and aims**

- making the philosophical underpinnings of the framework, including theories of learning and development more explicit.
- explicating the relationship between care and education within the framework to emphasise the educative nature of care and the caring nature of education.
- embracing the principle of cultural diversity more explicitly within the vision to highlight the early years as a critical time for learning to respect and understand difference as a natural part of life.

#### **Image of the child as a learner**

- further elaborating on the crucial role of play in the holistic development of the child, including the value of outdoor play, in particular.

#### **The adult's role**

- developing practical examples of how adults can support, facilitate, and model play for children

#### **Themes**

- reviewing the four proposed themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking) to include a greater focus on
  - (a) the child as a contributor to, and participant in the learning process
  - (b) the creative arts
  - (c) first and second language acquisition, and the official bilingual status of Irish
  - (d) the child's 'care' needs.
- exploring further how the framework's themes might 'connect' more readily with the developmental domains used in both the Primary School Curriculum and in much curriculum guidance used outside the formal education system.

#### **Assessment**

- examining the appropriate role of assessment (methods and tools) in early learning and providing explicit advice for adults in how to support their child's learning and development
- re-visiting the language of assessment to ensure shared understanding of assessment terms amongst all practitioners from different contexts and settings.

### **A model for presenting ‘learning’**

- differentiating the content of the framework to cater for the range of adults responsible for children’s early learning. This accessibility issue is particularly pertinent in the context of supporting parents/guardians as early educators.
- exploring how the framework can provide sufficient information to childminders and practitioners to support them in their work with children, while avoiding the development of a framework which is prescriptive and specific.

### **Implications of the findings for the sector**

During the consultation a number of issues were raised in relation to the supporting strategies required for implementation of the framework. While these are sectoral issues, they have the potential to significantly affect the extent to which the framework can contribute to the provision of quality learning experiences for children in their early years. The following issues were identified as critical during the consultation:

#### **Implementation**

- developing an implementation plan which would
  - (a) outline how the framework will be implemented
  - (b) identify the resources and supports which will be made available to enable the implementation process.
- adopting the six operational principles of the National Children’s Strategy as a framework for planning for the implementation of the *Framework for Early Learning*.
- outlining how the implementation of the framework might relate to existing inspection processes and arrangements (e.g. Dept. of Education and Science, Dept. of Health and Children) and monitoring programmes (e.g. quality assurance/improvement programmes developed by various organisations).
- demonstrating how the *Framework for Early Learning* can link with the National Framework for Quality being developed by the CECDE.
- achieving greater inter-agency and inter-departmental co-operation in supporting children in early childhood.

#### **Professional development**

- providing appropriate pre-service and ongoing professional development for those working in the early childhood sector. Assessment of children’s learning may require particular attention.

Many of these issues were also cited in the findings from the OECD’s thematic review which is discussed in the introduction to this report.

### **Follow-on work: Ongoing consultation**

The findings presented in this report will provide direction and guidance for the NCCA’s ongoing work in developing the framework. However, before concluding

this consultation report, it is important to emphasise that while this consultation is concluding, the work of the NCCA in developing the framework in consultation with the Early Childhood sector is really just beginning. During the consultation, the sector requested ongoing involvement in the developmental process, with targeted involvement of parents, practitioners and professionals in the health sector. The representation of children's and practitioners experiences and voices in the framework was also considered essential.

In analysing the findings from the consultation, the NCCA considered the representation of parents/guardians and health professionals to be lower than expected. Given parents'/guardians' critical role as early educators and the fact that health professionals play a central role in supporting many children particularly in their earliest years, the NCCA plans to engage with these two groups more extensively during the development work on the framework.

In designing the consultation on the document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, the NCCA planned to conduct consultation with children during the development of the framework itself rather than on the ideas expressed in the consultative document. It was envisaged that such a strategy would be more beneficial in terms of including children's voices in the design and contents of the framework. Consultation with children is a key principle underpinning the work of the National Children's Office (NCO) and following some initial discussions, the NCCA has already begun to design activities for consulting with children.

To ensure that the development of the framework is informed by the experiences of both children and adults in a range of settings, the NCCA plans to develop a range of portraits of early learning and development in these settings. The NCCA will work closely with a small number of early childhood settings reflecting the age range of children and the types of settings typical of the early childhood sector in Ireland. This work will enable the NCCA to consult with parents/guardians and various professionals in early childhood care and education on various elements of the framework as they are being designed and developed.

Finally, the NCCA's Early Childhood Committee will continue to support the development of the framework for early learning guided by the findings and implications of the consultation presented in this final report.





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# **APPENDIX 1**

## **RESPONSE FORM**



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## **APPENDIX 2**

# **QUESTION GUIDE FOR BILATERAL MEETINGS**





## ***Towards a Framework for Early Learning*** **A consultative document**

### **Question guide for bilateral meetings**

The questions below are intended to guide the discussions at the meeting. They are based on a number of the key ideas and proposals as presented in the consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*. In responding to the questions, we invite you to share the views of your organisation and those you represent in the early childhood sector.

#### **A national framework for early learning**

- What does your organisation consider to be the benefits and challenges of a national framework for early learning?
- How might the challenges be addressed?

#### **Vision and aims for the framework**

- To what extent are the vision and aims appropriate for a national framework?
- What challenges, if any, are associated with the vision and aims?
- How might these challenges be addressed?

#### **Image of the child as a learner and the role of the adult**

- To what extent does the image of the child as a learner reflect the differing experiences children have of early childhood?
- What are the implications of these differing experiences for the design and content of the framework?
- To what extent does the role of the adult as presented in the consultative document, convey the different levels and types of supports children may require to extend and enrich their learning at different stages in early childhood?
- What should this role primarily entail?

#### **Assessment**

- What should be the purpose of assessment in early childhood?
- What are the key challenges, if any, in assessing children's early learning?
- What 'tools' should be used to assess children's early learning?
- What assessment information should be documented?
- Should information be transferred from setting to setting as the child moves between centre-based settings (including infant classes in primary schools)? How?

**Thematic framework**

- How does your organisation view the thematic approach to presenting the 'content' of children's learning in the framework? Would you suggest alternative themes or amendments to the themes? If so, what?
- What challenges, if any, might a thematic framework present for adults in supporting children? How might these be addressed?
- The consultative document presents learning through themes, aims, broad learning goals and exemplars. Can this model provide the necessary guidance to adults? What changes, if any, would you make to the model?

## **APPENDIX 3**

### **QUESTION GUIDE FOR REGIONAL SEMINARS**



## ***Towards a Framework for Early Learning*** **A consultative document**

### **Question guide for regional seminars**

#### **A national framework**

*What do you think are the potential benefits and challenges of having a national framework to support children's learning from birth to six years?*

#### **Model for presenting learning**

The consultative document suggests a model for presenting the child's learning in the framework. This model consists of

- four themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking)
- aims
- goals
- suggested learning experiences
- exemplars of learning.

*What do you think are the potential benefits and challenges with this suggested model?*

*What other types of information do you think the framework should contain?*

#### **The role of assessment**

The consultative document discusses the role of assessment in nurturing the child's early learning. Assessment provides the adult with the knowledge to recognise and celebrate the child's progress, and to plan for and support his/her learning in the most appropriate manner.

*What do you think are the potential benefits and challenges with this role of assessment in nurturing the child's early learning?*

#### **Vision**

The consultative document presents a vision for the framework as follows:

The *Framework for Early Learning* promotes an early childhood for all children in Ireland where they can develop as learners within the context of trusting and loving relationships with others, and through meaningful engagement with their environment. They will be supported in their holistic development, and in realising their potential as learners in ways which reflect their individuality as well as their diverse experiences of childhood in Ireland in terms of their abilities, cultures, languages, and socio-economic backgrounds.

*To what extent do you agree with the vision for the framework? What changes, if any, would you make to it?*

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas with the NCCA.







An Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta  
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

*The Story of <sup>1</sup>Aistear: the Early  
Childhood Curriculum Framework:  
Partnership in Action*

Article originally published in *An Leanbh Óg,  
The OMEP Ireland Journal of Early Childhood  
Studies, Volume 3 – Issue 1- April 2009*

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<sup>1</sup> *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* used to be called *The Framework for Early Learning*.

## **Abstract**

This paper looks at the background to and the development of the *Framework For Early Learning*<sup>2</sup>, a curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years. The paper explores the partnership through which this took place. It describes the consultative process the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) undertook in 2004 and how this influenced and guided the development of the Framework. It also explains how the early childhood sector supported and provided expertise to the on-going development of the Framework. The paper presents a brief outline of the contents of the *Framework for Early Learning* marking eight years of collaborative work between the NCCA, children, parents, practitioners, training and education institutions, early childhood agencies/organisations and relevant government departments.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear* in 2009

## **Introduction**

The development of the *Framework for Early Learning* marks an exciting milestone in early years education and care in Ireland. It is the outcome of eight years of partnership between the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the early years sector. In developing the Framework the NCCA placed a strong emphasis on consultation and on developing partnerships with different interest groups. Pugh and De’Ath (1989 p. 5) describe partnership ‘as a working relationship that is characterised by a shared sense of purpose, mutual respect and willingness to negotiate. This implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability’. There are four partnership pillars underpinning the *Framework for Early Learning*. These are:

- the expertise and support of the Technical Working Group and the Early Childhood Committee;
- the consultation findings (NCCA, 2005);
- the portraiture study (NCCA, 2007);
- the four background papers (Hayes, 2007; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007; and Dunphy 2008).

These partnerships have led to the development of a curriculum framework that is unique to Ireland and which it is hoped will help all children under six years to become competent and confident learners. The *Framework for Early Learning* builds on and supports many of the other important developments for children under six years in Ireland. These include

- the *Childcare Act* (Department of Health and Science, 1991)

- Ireland's ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* in 1992 (United Nations, 1989)
- the *Report of the National Forum for Early Childhood Education* (Forum Secretariat, 1998)
- *Ready to Learn*, the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science, 1999a)
- the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b)
- the formulation of guidelines for the protection and welfare of children, *Children First* (Department of Health and Children, 1999) and *Our Duty to Care* (Department of Health and Children, 2002)
- the *National Children's Strategy, Our Children – Their Lives* (Department of Health and Science, 2000)
- *Ready, steady, play! A National Play Policy* (National Children's Office, 2004)
- *Early Childhood Care and Education Report 31* (National Economic and Social Forum, 2005)
- *Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations* (Department of Health and Children, 1996/2006)
- *Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006).

The impetus for the Framework came ten years ago and it is to this we turn now.

### **Policy Background**

In 1998 for the first time ever a national forum on early childhood education was held in Ireland. Amongst the issues raised at the Forum was concern over the lack of a national curriculum for young children outside of the primary school sector (including

those under the age of three years). The White Paper on Early Childhood Education '*Ready to Learn*' (1999) which emerged from the Forum recommended the development of national curriculum guidelines for the early years sector. The aim of doing this was to ensure that early childhood provision would be structured, developmental and of high quality. The guidelines were required not to prescribe specific curricular details but were to outline instead the broad principles of early childhood while giving individual providers the discretion to design and modify their particular curriculum. It was suggested that the guidelines would have regard to providing a range of experiences and learning opportunities to enhance all aspects of children's development and that the need for learning through play be taken into account. The inclusion of appropriate teaching methodologies was also recommended.

In addition, the development of a '*specimen*' curriculum for pre-school children, which will provide more specific detail on content and methodology (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 57) was recommended. This specimen curriculum could be used by providers if they so wished. For children under three years a less formal curriculum was to be developed, emphasising how children learn and how adults can help. Little reference was made to children aged four to six years as the revised *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science 1999b) for children from four to twelve years was due to be published.

### **The NCCA**

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is a statutory body that advises the Minister for Education and Science on curriculum for early childhood, primary and post-primary education as set out in Article 41-1[b] of the

Education Act (Department of Education and Science, 1998). Beginning the work in early childhood education the NCCA developed a background paper, *Early Childhood Framework for Learning* (NCCA 2001). The paper presented an initial exploration of the curriculum context related to early childhood, in Ireland and internationally. It also mapped the way forward for the NCCA's work in developing an early years curriculum. In that paper, the NCCA recommended to the Minister for Education and Science that rather than having three separate curricula, (one for birth to three year olds, one for three to four years olds, and one for four to six year olds in the primary school) a single national curriculum framework for all children from birth to six years should be developed. The Minister accepted the NCCA's advice and the NCCA began developing the Framework for all children from birth to six years of age. The Framework is relevant to all adults who care for and educate children in their early years – parents<sup>i</sup> and practitioners<sup>ii</sup>.

### **The Consultative Process**

The NCCA undertakes its work in close partnership with the stakeholders in education and works through representative committee structures. Consultation is a central principle of the work. In order to guide the preparatory work for the curriculum a technical working group was established. This Group comprised nine experts from the field of early childhood care and education in Ireland.

The Technical Working Group guided the development of NCCA's consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* which was published in 2004. This document outlined the vision, aims, and model for developing a curriculum for all children in Ireland from birth to six years. The nine key ideas presented in the



document provided the focus for the extensive consultation process that the NCCA then undertook. The early childhood sector was invited to provide feedback on the document in a number of ways. Response forms were available online and in hardcopy. Four regional seminars were held in Cork, Dublin, Galway and Monaghan. A number of briefings were held with organisations and agencies. Written submissions were made by a number of individual organisations and individuals. An invitational seminar was held in Dublin Castle on December 9th 2004 to explore some of the findings from the consultation to date and to gather further feedback.

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### **Consultation Findings**

In May 2005, the NCCA published the document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning: Final Consultation Report*. In this document the early childhood sector expressed broad agreement with the vision and aims outlined for the Framework. Alongside this the sector also identified a number of areas which required further consideration. The areas can be grouped under three headings: the Framework's philosophy, vision and aims; the Framework's contents; and the process of developing and supporting the Framework. These are presented in detail below.

### **The Framework's Philosophy, Vision and Aims**

- Making the philosophical underpinnings of the Framework, including theories of learning and development more explicit.
- Looking at the relationship between care and education within the Framework to emphasise the educative nature of care and the caring nature of education.

- Embracing the principle of cultural diversity more explicitly within the vision to highlight the early years as a crucial time for learning to respect and understand difference as a natural part of life.
- Emphasising the image of the child as an active learner and contributor.
- Exploring further how the Framework's themes might connect more readily with the developmental domains used in both the Primary School Curriculum and in much curriculum guidance used outside the formal education system.

### **The Framework's Contents**

- Further elaborating on the crucial role of play in the holistic development of the child, including the value of outdoor play in particular.
- Placing a greater focus on the creative arts.
- Emphasising the development of first and second language acquisition and the status of Gaeilge.
- Examining the appropriate role of assessment (methods and tools) in early learning and providing explicit advice for adults in how to support their child's learning and development.
- Differentiating the contents of the Framework to cater for the range of adults responsible for children's early learning. This accessibility issue was highlighted as being particularly pertinent in the context of supporting parents as early educators.

### **The Process of Developing and Supporting the Framework**

- Including the voices of children and parents in the Framework.

- Exploring how the Framework could provide sufficient information to childminders and practitioners to support them in their work with children, while avoiding the development of a Framework which would be prescriptive.
- Expressing concern about the interpretation and implementation of the Framework given the diversity of expertise and experience among those in the early childhood sector. The feedback highlighted that the extent of professional development and support provided will significantly impact on the success of the Framework.

The consultation findings provided direction and guidance for the NCCA's ongoing work in developing the Framework. Once the consultation ended the early childhood sector continued to be involved in the development of the Framework through an early childhood committee and through a research study.

### **Early Childhood Committee**

Following the consultation, the Early Childhood Committee (ECC) was set up with a brief to support the NCCA's work in developing the Framework. The Committee had 15 members comprising representatives from the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, the National Voluntary Childcare Collaborative, government departments concerned with the early years, the Health Service Executive, the National Parent's Council (Primary), the Irish National Teacher's Organisation, the Irish Federation of University Teachers, the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, Foras na Gaeilge and school management bodies. The committee provided ongoing support and expertise from multiple perspectives.

## **Research Study**

In designing the consultation on the document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, the NCCA planned to undertake a research study to include the voices and experiences of children in the Framework. To realise this, in 2006 the NCCA undertook a portraiture study. Portraiture is a form of qualitative research inquiry and involves developing a picture with words of children's experiences. The purpose of the study was to see what children liked doing, where they liked to be and who they liked to be with. The NCCA worked with 12 children in 11 settings around the country. A range of settings was involved – a home, a childminder's home, a Montessori pre-school, two nurseries, a crèche, a naíonra (an Irish medium pre-school), an Early Start setting, a Traveller pre-school and two infant classes in primary schools. Four girls and eight boys took part in the study and the children ranged in age from nine months to almost six years. A number of key messages were highlighted through the study. These included the importance of holistic learning and development through play and first-hand experiences, the importance of relationships, especially the crucial role of parents, the power of communication, the importance of a sense of identity and belonging and the benefits of observing and listening to children. These key messages have informed the development of the Framework. The portraiture study called *Listening for Children's Stories: Children as Partners in the Framework for Early Learning* is available to download on the NCCA website ([ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://ncca.ie/earlylearning)). Three additional papers have been written about the study. These are: *Children's voices in the Framework for Early Learning* (Daly, Forster, Murphy, Sweeney, Brennan, Maxwell, 2007); *The NCCA's Portraiture Study: Key messages* (Daly, Forster, Murphy, Sweeney, 2008); and *Listening for Children's*

*Stories: The NCCA's Portraiture Study* (Brennan, Daly, Forster, Maxwell, Murphy, O'Connor, Sweeney 2008).

### **Background Papers<sup>3</sup>**

The consultation feedback indicated the importance of documenting the theory 'behind' the Framework. In order to do this, the NCCA commissioned a series of four background papers. The papers were written by experts in early childhood care and education in Ireland. This work represents another element of partnership<sup>4</sup>, partnership with the academic community. The papers and their executive summaries are available to download at [www.ncca.ie/backgroundpapers](http://www.ncca.ie/backgroundpapers). The papers are

- *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care* (Hayes, 2007)
- *Children's early learning and development* (French, 2007)
- *Play as a context for early learning and development* (Kernan, 2007)
- *Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment* (Dunphy, 2008).

Much of the research used to develop the *Framework for Early Learning* is summarised in these papers. A short synopsis of each of the papers is outlined below.

#### **Paper 1: *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care***

In this background paper, Dr Nóirín Hayes (2007) looks at how the development of the education and childcare sectors in Ireland as 'separate' streams creates challenges in working towards quality early years provision. The paper states that the independent development of the educational and childcare sectors has been identified as one of the key difficulties facing the reform and development of early education in

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<sup>3</sup> The Background papers are now called Research Papers

Ireland. The paper addresses the two recurrent, interacting and often, contentious concepts of education and care, which are central to the provision of early childhood education. The paper does this by considering the context within which early education is currently developing, nationally and internationally. In particular the paper considers how approaches to understanding the concepts of education and care impact on the lives of children from birth to six years through their influence on policy, curriculum and practice, and professional development in early childhood care and education (ECCE). In summary, the paper highlights how early years learning environments that are well planned, with a balance between care and education and have well-trained, confident and supported staff lead to positive outcomes for children.

### **Paper 2: *Children's early learning and development***

In this background paper, Geraldine French (2007) essentially responds to the question - *How should we envision and understand the child as a young learner?* The paper begins by outlining the context for early childhood care and education in Ireland, referring to our economic and social climate, the increasingly multicultural nature of Irish society and relevant legislation and policy. Drawing on centuries of research, the modern day view of the child is one of him/her being a competent learner, capable of making choices and decisions; a young citizen and participator in many contexts (family, early childhood setting, community and society); actively learning in reciprocal relations with adults and other children. This new construction of childhood is oriented towards the child's present with a focus on *being* rather than *becoming*. In summary, the paper emphasises the importance of meaningful experiences, nurturing, responsive relationships and play and language as priorities for supporting children's early learning and development.

### **Paper 3: *Play as a context for early learning and development***

In this background paper, Dr Margaret Kernan (2007) addresses the relationship between play, development and learning with the ultimate aim of elaborating on the place of play in early learning and development. The paper seeks both to re-examine the ‘taken for granted’ position of play as central to early childhood curricula, and to conceptualise a rigorous understanding of a ‘pedagogy of play’. A key message in this paper is that all children from birth to six years have a right to play and to benefit from their play experiences. The paper refers to the many types of play—exploratory, constructive, creative, pretend, fantasy, socio-dramatic, physical, and language and word play. Another message in this paper is that the physical environment, the people and objects in it and the time and space available influence how and what children play and the benefits they get from play. Children’s individual characteristics and backgrounds also influence how and what they play. The paper also describes the adult’s important role in supporting and extending play. In summary, the paper stresses that good quality play experiences impact positively on children’s learning and development.

### **Paper 4: *Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment***

In this background paper, Dr Elizabeth Dunphy (2008) responds to the question – *In the early years what should we assess and how?* The paper begins by exploring the interrelatedness of teaching, learning and assessment. It also describes the practice and legislative landscape in which assessment takes place in Ireland. The paper outlines the characteristics and complexity of early learning and identifies key implications for assessment. The paper describes assessment as collecting,



documenting, reflecting on and using information to develop pictures of children as learners. It suggests that formative assessment helps adults to ‘see’ what children are thinking and feeling, what they understand and can do. The adult uses the assessment information to plan future learning experiences, and to make learning interesting and successful for children. The adult assesses by watching, listening, talking with and empathising with children. Over time, children too can assess their own learning. The paper refers to a narrative approach to assessment—describing early learning using notes, stories, samples of ‘work’ and photographs. This offers a way of building a rich picture of early learning and development over time. The paper highlights how this approach can be demanding yet rewarding. Finally, the paper maps the way forward in developing formative assessment practice by identifying the importance of professional development opportunities during both pre- and in-service. In summary, the paper emphasises the importance of assessment in supporting children’s early learning and development.

### **Contents of the *Framework for Early Learning***

The consultation findings (NCCA, 2005), the portraiture study (NCCA, 2007) and the four background papers (Hayes, 2007; French, 2007; Kernan, 2007; and Dunphy, 2008) along with the expertise of the Early Childhood Committee and Technical Working Group have helped shape the *Framework for Early Learning*. The Framework will be presented in two parts (See Table 1). Part 1 will outline the underlying principles and themes of the Framework while Part 2 will provide a series of practical guidelines. A user guide to help adults use the Framework will also be included.

**Table 1: Contents of the Framework for Early Learning**

Part 1: Principles and Themes	Part 2: Guidelines on good practice
Principles	Partnerships with parents
Themes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <i>Well-Being</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Identity and Belonging</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Communicating</i></li> <li>▪ <i>Exploring and Thinking</i></li> </ul>	Interactions  Play  Assessment
User Guide	

The *Framework for Early Learning* is based on 12 early childhood principles which will be presented in Part 1 of the Framework in three groups. The principles will be presented using a theoretical or philosophical statement followed by a detailed interpretation from the child’s perspective of what this requires of the adult in practice.

**Table 2: Principles underlying the Framework**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ The child’s uniqueness</li> <li>▪ Equality and diversity</li> <li>▪ Children as citizens</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Relationships</li> <li>▪ The adult’s role</li> <li>▪ Parents and family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Holistic learning and development</li> <li>▪ Active learning</li> <li>■ Play and hands-on experiences</li> <li>▪ Communication and language</li> <li>▪ Relevant and meaningful experiences</li> <li>▪ The Learning Environment</li> </ul>
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In addition Part 1 will present the themes of the Framework and will describe the types of experiences which are important for children in early childhood. All learning

is connected and different aspects of children’s learning and development often take place at the same time. Rather than looking at physical or intellectual development in isolation or at curriculum subjects like English or Visual Arts the Framework will use four broad themes that connect and overlap with each other to outline children’s learning and development. The themes will be – *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking* (see Table 3). Together the themes will offer a way to plan for and support children’s learning and development so that they benefit from positive and enjoyable experiences in their early childhood years.

Using the four themes the Framework will focus on developing children’s dispositions and skills, nurturing attitudes and values, and building knowledge and understanding of their world. The themes will be presented using aims and broad learning goals. Sample activities will be used to illustrate practice in three overlapping age stages - for babies (birth to 18 months), toddlers (12 to 36 months) and young children (2 ½ to 6 years).

**Table 3: The Framework’s themes**

<b>Well-being</b>	<b>Identity and Belonging</b>	<b>Communicating</b>	<b>Exploring and Thinking</b>
... is about children being confident, happy and healthy within themselves and in their families, communities and society.	... is about children developing positive feelings about who they are and having a sense of belonging in their families and communities.	... is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence in a variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.	... is about children investigating and making sense of the world.

The second part of the Framework will include guidelines that describe good practice.

These guidelines will focus on:

- developing partnerships with parents and families;
- interacting with children;
- learning through play;
- using assessment to support early learning and development.

A series of reflection prompts to help adults to think about their pedagogy will also be included as will sample activities to illustrate key messages from the guidelines.

### **Connections**

The *Framework for Early Learning* will build on and support many of the developments that are already in place in Ireland for children under six years. The Framework has been developed through widespread consultation and negotiation with the early childhood sector. This has culminated in a Framework that will be descriptive, practical and reflective of children, families and practitioners and their respective settings and experiences in Ireland. The *Framework for Early Learning* will allow for individual interpretation and local decision-making informed by common aims and goals for all children. The Framework will complement existing policy, legislation and structures already in place such as the *Revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations* (Department of Health and Children, 2006), *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (CECDE, 2006) and the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b).

A key piece of legislation for all practitioners outside the primary school sector is the *Revised Childcare (Pre-school Services) Regulations* (Department of Health and

Children, 2006). The Framework will help practitioners to implement these regulations, in particular Regulation 5. This regulation emphasises the importance of providing appropriate learning opportunities, activities and interactions for children to support their learning, development and well-being. The Framework will help practitioners to provide children with these experiences.

The Framework also has strong links with *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*. In particular, the Framework will help practitioners with the *Síolta* standards related to curriculum, environments, identity and belonging, partnership with parents, interactions and play. The NCCA and the CECDE worked collaboratively on an audit to identify similarities and differences between the two frameworks and to show how the two could be used together by practitioners to enhance their early years practice. The audit was used to inform the User Guide for the Framework which includes sample plans using the Framework and *Síolta*. A similar audit was also carried out on the Framework and the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b). This audit shows how the Framework and the *Primary School Curriculum* can be used together by teachers to plan for, teach, assess and review their work with junior and senior infants. This audit was also used to inform the Framework's User Guide.

The Framework also complements and supports the many different curricula being used in settings around the country. It can be used to support and extend children's experiences while still maintaining the particular ethos of the setting. Together with appropriate resources, the *Framework for Early Learning* can make a positive

contribution to the experiences of children under the age of six in Ireland and can be a useful resource to all adults who educate and care for them.

## **Conclusion**

The publication of the *Framework for Early Learning* will mark an important milestone for early years education and care in Ireland. It will be the outcome of a partnership between the NCCA, children, parents, practitioners, training and education institutions, and relevant agencies, organisations and government departments. This partnership has enabled the NCCA to draw upon and build on the expertise and commitment within the early years sector and has culminated in a curriculum framework that will help all children under age six to reach their full potential as young learners.

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<sup>i</sup> The term *parent* refers to the child's primary caregivers and educators. These include the child's father and mother and/or guardian(s).

<sup>ii</sup> The term *practitioners* refers to all those working in a specialised manner with children in early childhood settings including childminding settings and infant classes in primary schools. Practitioners have a diversity of experience and qualifications ranging from unaccredited through to post-graduate level.