

# Early Childhood

**How Aistear was developed:**  
Research Papers



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The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) commissioned four research papers to inform the work in developing *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*.

Drawing on national and international research, these papers look at how:

- particular understandings of education and care impact on children's experiences during early childhood education
- children learn and develop in early childhood
- play can be used to extend and enhance children's learning and development
- formative assessment can support and extend early learning and development.

### Want to read more?

Read a summary of the key messages from the research papers.

Click on the links below to go to the papers and/or their executive summaries.

#### 1. Education and care

Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood (Hayes, 2007)

- Research paper
- Executive summary

#### 2. Learning and development

Children's early learning and development  
(French, 2007)

- Research paper
- Executive summary

#### 3. Play

Play as a context for early learning and development (Kernan, 2007)

- Research paper
- Executive summary

#### 4. Formative assessment

Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment (Dunphy, 2008)

- Research paper
- Executive summary



# Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige  
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



**Key messages from  
the research papers**

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National Council for Curriculum  
and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square, Dublin 2.  
[www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)

## Introduction

Early childhood in Ireland is from birth to six years. During this period, children can spend time in different settings and adults in these settings can use different approaches to help them learn and develop. This variety helps to meet the different needs of children and their families at different times in their lives.

Ireland has changed a lot in recent years. Families tend to be smaller with both parents working in many cases. The population is more diverse than ever before. There have also been changes in policy and legislation (see below). These developments highlight the importance of and children's right to learning and development opportunities based on their interests, strengths, culture, and specific needs. *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* plays an important role in giving children these opportunities.

### Some policy and legislative developments

- The Child Care Act (1991)
- Ireland's ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1992)
- The Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations (1996, 2006)
- The Primary School Curriculum (1999)
- The National Children's Strategy (2000)
- The National Play Policy (2003)
- *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006)
- Legislation on education, and the needs and rights of children with special educational needs (1998; 2004; 2005).

## A review of research

Much of the research used to develop *Aistear* is summarised in four papers:

1. Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood (Hayes, 2007)
2. Children's early learning and development (French, 2007)
3. Play as a context for early learning and development (Kernan, 2007)
4. Supporting children's early learning and development through formative assessment (Dunphy, 2008).

These papers are on the NCCA website at [www.ncca.ie/earlylearning](http://www.ncca.ie/earlylearning). This booklet summarises each paper and concludes with an overview of the key messages.

### Paper 1: The relationship between education and care

The paper *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood* (Hayes, 2007) discusses how the development of the education and childcare sectors in Ireland as 'separate' creates challenges in working towards quality early years provision. The paper also looks at what the terms 'education' and 'care' mean and suggests how greater balance between the two might be brought about.

An important message in the paper is that learning and development can take place in day-to-day caring routines and relationships. At the same time, education can be provided in a caring way. The paper describes this approach as a 'nurturing pedagogy' which emphasises children's feelings and dispositions such as motivation, confidence, perseverance, and how they see themselves as learners. It promotes communication, thinking and problem-solving skills.

The paper emphasises the key role the adult plays in a nurturing pedagogy. He/she encourages playful interactions and behaviours, explorations, conversations, and collaborative learning. The adult also observes, reflects on and interprets children's words and actions. This is necessary for planning future learning opportunities.

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: Early learning and development**

The paper *Children's early learning and development* (French, 2007) describes children as competent young learners, able to make choices and decisions, who learn with and from each other at home, in early childhood settings and in their communities. Through these different relationships children learn about their world. Trust, respect, love, and care are at the heart of relationships which enable children to grow, learn and develop. Opportunities for co-operation, playfulness, problem-solving, and conflict resolution are all valued.

Another message in the paper is that children constantly make connections between their new learning and previous learning. Much of this happens through language and play with others. Using these children build a sense of identity and belonging to their family, settings and community. They learn from others, and think about and learn from the effects of their actions and words. They use their senses, physical activity, imagination, and creativity. This learning and development is enhanced by challenging and interesting places, indoor and outdoor, to explore and investigate. A balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities in these places is also important.

According to the research presented in the paper learning is enhanced when parents/family and the early childhood setting work together. By being involved in their children's early learning, parents can improve their children's motivation to learn.

In summary, the paper emphasises active learning, relationships, play, language, and meaningful experiences as priorities for supporting children's early learning and development.

## **Paper 3: Play**

The paper *Play as a context for early learning and development* (Kernan, 2007) explains that all children from birth to six years have a right to time and space to play and to benefit from their play experiences. Play is voluntary, spontaneous and meaningful. When playing children can experience risk within safe and secure boundaries. They can often concentrate for long periods of time too. Play is also often very social—children enjoy playing with other children and with adults. Above all, play is fun and an important part of children's learning and development.

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 available influence how children play and the benefits they get from play. Children's individual characteristics and backgrounds also influence how and what they play.

The paper describes the adult's important role. Play changes as children grow and develop and so too does this role. For example, the familiar adult offers babies and young toddlers a secure physical and emotional base which encourages them to explore. He/she creates opportunities for toddlers to move, and young children to role-play and pretend. In order to support and extend children's play the skilled adult observes, listens and interprets children's play. He/she provides interesting and challenging indoor and outdoor spaces with lots of time for play. Explaining the importance of play to parents is also necessary.

In summary, good quality play experiences impact positively on children's learning and development.

## Paper 4: Formative assessment

The paper *Supporting children's early learning and development through formative assessment* (Dunphy, 2008) describes assessment as collecting, documenting, reflecting on, and using information to develop portraits of children as learners. 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.

According to the paper assessment should focus on children's development of dispositions, attitudes and values as well as their skills, knowledge and understandings. Assessment happens as part of everyday activities, tasks and routines. It is sensitive and respectful to children. In this way, the paper illustrates how assessment shows the richness of children's learning and development as well as identifying aspects that might benefit from attention and specific supports. 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.

In summary, the paper emphasises the importance of assessment in supporting children's early learning and development. Understanding how children learn and develop is an important foundation for good assessment which benefits both children and adults.

## Common messages

So what does the research tell us about helping children to learn and develop here in Ireland? This section uses two questions to identify key messages from across the research papers. Some of the messages are from individual papers while others are common to a number of the papers.

What does the research tell us about children as **learners** in early childhood?

- Children are competent, confident and capable learners, able to make choices and decisions.
- They love learning about their world—why and how things happen the way they do. Children do this by interacting with people and things in different places.
- Children learn
  - through their senses—seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling.
  - by 'doing things'.
  - by playing.
  - using language.
  - in interesting and challenging indoor and outdoor environments.
  - when they feel secure and loved.
- Early childhood is an important time for developing children's ability to persevere, take risks and solve problems; to develop confidence and independence; to nurture their curiosity; and to develop an identity as a learner.

What then are the most important factors for **positive learning outcomes** for children?

- Quality interactions with other children, adults, objects, and places.
- A language-rich environment that encourages play, exploration, conversations, and collaboration between adults and children, and between children and children.
- A balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities.
- Play and hands-on experiences indoors and outdoors.
- Adults who observe, empathise, listen, and talk to children.
- Connections and progression in learning as children move from one setting to another.
- Supportive relationships between parents and settings.

To achieve this, you need adults who respect children as young learners; are confident and knowledgeable about how children learn and develop; are aware of the impact of their own beliefs and perceptions on children; and respect diversity amongst children and their families. Initial and continuing professional development, and mentoring and support for adults working with children are therefore essential.

These key messages have shaped *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* including the identification of its four themes: *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking*. Together the themes 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.

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National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)

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# Aistear

*Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige*  
*The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

**Perspectives on the relationship  
between education and care in  
early childhood**

**A research paper**

# **Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood**

**A research paper**

Nóirín Hayes, PhD

Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA.



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## Introduction

This paper, *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood* was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to highlight the important role of both care and education in the lives of children. The paper addresses the two recurrent, interacting and often contentious concepts central to the provision of early childhood education - education and care. It does so by considering the context within which early education is currently developing, nationally and internationally. In particular it 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, practice and professional development in early childhood care and education (ECCE).

There is a growing body of research on the critical value of understanding the nature of care and its role and status in a healthy and equitable society (Daly, 2002; Held, 2006; Katz, Noddings & Strike, 1999; Lynch & Lyons, 2005; Noddings, 1992). While this debate has relevance to the wider discussions about the role of care and affective equality in society it is beyond the scope of this paper.

There is much discussion across the sector - nationally and internationally - on the term best used to describe the unique and diverse types of provision for children in the age range birth through to six years. In Ireland, at a policy level, a distinction has been made between childcare and early education. Indeed, within policy documents the references vary from Childcare (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999) to Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science, 1999a; CECDE, 2006) through to Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD, 2004) and Early Childhood Care and Education (NESF, 2004). It is the contention of this paper that quality provision in all the various services for children from birth to six years incorporates a balance of both care and education and is best described by the term 'early education'.

Until recently there has been very limited research attention to the early educational experiences of children in Ireland (Walsh, 2003) and much of what does exist has focused on intervention programmes for children considered at risk of future school failure (Hayes, 1995; Kellaghan, Weir, O'hUallacháin & Morgan, 1995; Ryan, O'hUallacháin & Hogan, 1998). As a result much of this paper draws on the findings of international research. It is informed by our current understanding that learning is a social process and that children, from the very earliest, are active participants in the shared construction of knowledge. This understanding of the social nature of learning and the interactive creation of meaning calls for a review of practices with respect to the field of early childhood care and education, to ensure that the opportunities available to young children in the early years settings they attend are educational, caring, reciprocal and challenging.

This research paper, *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood* explains the inseparable nature of education and care in early years provision across all settings and highlights the caring nature of education and the educative nature of care. Section 1 of the paper, *Understanding early childhood care and education* looks at the concepts of care and education and highlights the dichotomy that has developed between them. Section 2, on *Education, care and policy development* explains how early years services influence and are influenced by cultural and societal beliefs about young children, the role of the family and the purpose of early years services. Section 3, *Curriculum and practice* stresses the dynamic nature of early education and the move away from more prescribed curricula to learning frameworks based on broadly agreed principles of child development, learning and pedagogy with an emphasis on the active and interactive nature of early learning. The paper outlines the need for a synthesis of care and education, practically and conceptually to support children's overall development. Section 4, *Towards effective learning* emphasises the need to support the development of the whole child and to focus on how to support effective learning. The section highlights the critical role of the adult in supporting children to be competent and masterful learners from the earliest age. Section 5, on *Professional development for early childhood care and education* discusses how well-educated early years practitioners can contribute to and sustain quality early education which in turn yields positive short and long-term benefits for children. The concluding comments clarify and summarise the key messages across the paper. Key points arising from the discussion are presented in shaded boxes throughout the paper.

## Section 1: Understanding early childhood care and education

There is no linear relationship or neat path of progression from a single developmental theory to a single pedagogical approach (Johnson, 1988), or vice versa. Researchers recognise that to understand more about the influence of early education on the development and learning of young children, studies must take account of the contexts in which learning occurs and the meanings they have for the children and adults involved. Increasingly, researchers are undertaking the examination of development within natural contexts. Questions about how children learn and, in response, how they should be ‘taught’ are guiding curriculum development and practice, rather than questions about what children should learn and the content of the curriculum. Educators, policymakers and researchers are increasingly seeking to understand what it is that children do to influence how they learn and what role others have, rather than merely prescribing what children should be learning.

Our understanding of the importance of relationships and interactions in the process of development has been strengthened by research which has shown the powerful role that the social context plays, particularly in the lives of very young children. Studies into collaborative learning in context and the importance of ‘intersubjectivity’ – the ability to ‘read other minds’ (Bruner, 1996) – have informed a move towards practice which sees the child as an active participant in the learning process (David, 1999a).

The support for the notion of collective learning derives from a theoretical stance on the social nature of learning and the social construction of meaning. It is based on the belief that activity and participation in shared activities play a key role in development (Rogoff, 1990; Kuhn, 1997). The importance of bidirectional, transformational interactions has been defended in terms of its contribution to early brain development (Blakemore, 2000; Blakemore & Firth, 2000; Shore, 1999) and to facilitating children to explain their ideas to others, negotiate, argue a point and clarify their thinking (Hohmann & Weikart, 1995).

### Key point

The quality of children’s interactions with adults and with the environment plays an important part in the quality of their learning at all ages.

Collaborative learning between peers is considered particularly important in early childhood, where the collaborative opportunities in a safe environment enhance children’s opportunities to refine their cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (Cullen, 2001; Rogoff, 1998). Larkin (2002) asserts that collaboration with peers and adults, as opposed to individual work, is valuable because it results, in practice and in both parties, in explaining one’s thought processes and seeing things from another’s viewpoint. Studying the shared basis of learning in peer groups and ‘learning communities’ has provided concepts such as socially shared cognition, distributed cognition and situated knowledge which emphasise the collective nature of knowing (Brown, 1994; Lave, 1991; Salomon, 1993), consonant with Dewey’s idea of the individual as a social learner even when interacting with objects or concepts.

This paper presents evidence that the dynamic process approach to early childhood care and education offers more for children’s positive development and learning than either the academic (education) or play-based (care) approach alone. Research consistently shows that successful early education facilitates the child in active learning in learning environments or ‘dispositional milieu’ (Carr, 2001a) that are well planned, where staff are well trained, confident and supported<sup>1</sup> in their work (Abbott & Moylett, 1999; Ball, 1994; David, 1993; Department of Education and Science, 2002; Katz, 1996). Interpretation has become central to both children and adults as they participate in the process of early education: children interpreting and making sense of the world; and adults observing, reflecting on and interpreting children’s behaviour to assess, to plan the curriculum and to guide their practice.

<sup>1</sup> Staff support is reflected in adequate remuneration, good conditions and services, access to Continuing Professional Development and recognition, within the working day, of the need to plan, review and reflect on practice as part of quality provision.

**Key point**

Learning is a social process; knowledge and meanings are constructed through active, shared interactions.

Quality models of early education are characterised by underpinning principles which present a view of the child as an active partner in the integrated and ongoing process of learning reflecting a strong commitment to developing the social and affective dimensions of learning as well as the more traditional emphasis on cognitive development. This reflects the views expressed by many, for example, Ball, 1994; Bruner, 1996; Carr, 2001b; Rutter, 1985; and Sylva, 1994a that the most important learning in early education has to do with the 'soft'<sup>2</sup>, affective and difficult to measure aspects of development such as aspirations, social skills, motivation, organisation, learner identity and confidence.

Research studies report that the positive impact of early education is found across all social groups but is strongest in children from disadvantaged backgrounds and that the most important learning in preschool concerns aspiration, task commitment, social skills, responsibility and feelings of efficacy in the child (Rutter, 1983, 1985; Sylva, 1994a, 1994b). Furthermore, five particular early childhood dimensions that contribute to the child's positive development and later success in school, have been identified: health and physical development; emotional well-being and social competence; positive approaches to learning; communication skills; and cognitive and general knowledge (OECD, 2002, p. 14.).

**Key point**

Quality early childhood education and care impacts positively on all children but is most beneficial to those from disadvantaged backgrounds

There is not, nor should we expect there to be, one universal agreed understanding of early childhood education and care (Moss, 2006). Whilst the period is one that can be defined by a particular age span (in this case, birth to six years) it is hugely diverse in terms of settings, practices and the needs of parents and children. This diversity is welcome and reflects the different realities of childhood for children across time and context. It is also challenging, as it requires a continuous interrogation of policy and practice against the dynamic and changing reality of everyday life. Contributing to the diversity across early educational settings in Ireland is the fact that certain settings are supported through the Department of Education and Science and seen as having a traditionally understood educational role, whilst others are supported through departments such as the Department of Health and Children or the Department of Social and Family Affairs and are seen as having a predominantly welfare or caring role. While this has important implications from a policy point of view (Bennett, 2006), as far as the child is concerned, the auspices of the service are irrelevant and should not impact differentially on the quality or sustainability of the early years experience itself.

In the context of the continuing distinction made between care and education in certain countries, a distinction which mirrors that made between play-based and academic models of early education, Caldwell (1989) attempted to find a balance by coining the term 'educare'. This concept was intended to bring together care and education as equally important for curriculum development and pedagogy, and was intended to describe an approach to education that offered *a developmentally appropriate mixture of education and care; of stimulation and nurture; of work and play* (p. 266). Although the term has not really been taken up in the everyday language of early education, it has forced further debate about how best to consider these two interconnected elements of early education and, in particular, how to reconceptualise 'care' so that it ranks equally with education in early educational process and practice (Hayes, 2003a; Karlsson & Pramling, 2003). One of the obstacles to this is the strong association between the concept of care and that of mothering. To move beyond this it is necessary to improve our understanding of what it is to be a caring practitioner<sup>3</sup> and to acknowledge that it goes beyond the notion of 'gentle smiles and warm hugs', which obscures the critical developmental and educational value of early education and the complex intellectual challenge of working with children during early childhood (Dalli,

<sup>2</sup> The word 'soft' is used to refer to those aspects of development, which are hard to measure and difficult to 'teach' directly. They are critical to the overall sense of self and to the development of an understanding of oneself as a learner.

<sup>3</sup> Titles for the adult working with the child, in the early childhood sector are varied, and for the purposes of this paper, the terms adult or practitioner are used interchangeably.

2003).

**Key point**

Effective early learning environments are nurturing. Caring is educational; education is caring and both are effective when responsive to the child.

It has been argued that reconceptualising care as nurture would strengthen the attention to the educative value of care and allow for a more appropriate ‘nurturing pedagogy’ to emerge in early education learning environments (Hayes, 2003b). Although not widely used in Ireland, pedagogy is a word that captures the multi-layered and dynamic practice necessary to support children’s holistic development. Petrie (2004) makes the case for using this term to reflect the complex roles of those working directly with children and she argues that the term creates the image of a professional space where care and education meet, integrate and become one.

Combining the word pedagogy with the term nurture is intended to strengthen this case. The word nurture has quite a different tone to it than the word care. In comparing the meaning of the two words, ‘nurture’ is more engaging and active than ‘care’. To some the verb ‘to care’ is almost custodial in tone and requires a minimum of interaction; the adult merely provides for and looks after the child. To nurture, on the other hand conveys a far more engaged level of interaction and requires the adult to actively nourish, rear, foster, train, and educate the child through his/her practice.

If adults are to nurture children’s learning they must develop the skills of observation and reflection to allow for non-intrusive planning and for the provision of a learning environment that includes children and supports and extends their learning. This allows for increased attention to positive interactions between child and adult, and 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. It encourages the movement away from the more traditional, organisational/management role of the practitioner evident from the research into Irish practice with young children in primary schools (Hayes, 2004; Murphy, 2004). It also strengthens the focus on the pedagogical role of the adult, sometimes absent in more play-based settings (Hayes, O’Flaherty & Kernan, 1997; Weikart, Olmsted & Montie, 2003). A nurturing pedagogy fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge, between children and adults, within the context of an emerging curriculum responsive to the child in the immediate now. This pedagogy highlights the importance of initial and continuing professional development for the adult.

**Key point**

Observing children in their action, and inaction, provides a rich basis from which to provide experiences and environments that facilitate learning.

The designation ‘early childhood care and education’ is gaining a wide currency across the sector in Ireland. Both the OECD and the NESF use slight variations of the term in the title of their influential reports, *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* (2004) and *Early Childhood Care and Education* (NESF, 2005). The introduction to *Síolta* - the national quality framework for early childhood education notes that, *This term (Early Childhood Care and Education) has strong endorsement from the diverse range of stakeholders in the provision of services, as it reinforces the inseparable nature of care and education essential to the provision of quality early experiences* (CECDE, 2006, p. 3).

**Key point**

There is emerging consensus and understanding in Ireland of the inseparable nature of education and care in early years provision across all settings.

Notwithstanding the general sectoral and policy acceptance of the term the OECD does caution that ... *it is clear that a national policy on the early education and care of young children in Ireland is still in its initial stages. Care and education are still treated separately...* (OECD, 2004, p. 6). The following section looks at education, care

and policy development and discusses the fact that the dichotomy between care and education impacts on the services and supports children receive.

## Section 2: Education, care and policy development

The degree to which a state involves itself in early education and the extent to which early education is regarded as a care/welfare or an educational aspect of policy influences the funding, focus and the status of early education and, in turn, the process of early education itself. From the thematic review of early childhood education and care policy across twelve countries carried out by the OECD (2000, 2006) it is evident that reasons for investing in early education are embedded in cultural and societal beliefs about children; the role of the family; and the purposes of early education. For instance, the majority of early years services in Italy, Scandinavia and New Zealand are developed as a support to parents and their children. They are state-supported for all children and no distinction is drawn between the care and educational dimensions (Moss, 2006). The services offered tend to be full day and available to the majority of children. In Italy, government-supported voluntary preschool education attracts 94% of three to five year olds (Corsaro, 2003).

### Key point

How early years services are supported influences, and is influenced by, cultural and societal beliefs about children, the role of the family and the purpose of early years services.

On the other hand, in Ireland, England, Northern Ireland and the United States (U.S.) - the Anglo-American approach - there is a clear policy distinction drawn between care and education. In these countries, children typically attend primary school from the age of 4/5 years. Those early educational, or preschool services outside the school system and receiving state funding are largely supported as part-day educational intervention for disadvantaged children and their families (Bowman, Donovan & Burns, 2001; Hayes, 2001; OECD, 2000). They are targeted at children considered to be at risk in terms of their linguistic and cognitive development and often include a compensatory education dimension to their programmes to give children a 'headstart' before they enter elementary school. In Ireland, the Rutland Project and the Early Start programme are examples of this type of provision (Hayes, 2001; Department of Education and Science, 1999a). In these countries the majority of early years provision outside the primary school system is considered to be childcare and is regulated, in the main, as a health, safety and welfare, rather than education, service. While receiving some state support in certain circumstances it is mainly privately funded as either a 'for-profit' or 'not for profit' service.

### Key point

In Ireland, many early years settings outside the primary school infant classes are considered to be health and social services rather than educational.

In considering state approaches to funding childcare, Bennett (2005) proposes a model, which groups countries according to the level of public investment in childcare (Figure 1). The model mirrors Esping Anderson's common, if somewhat controversial, classification of welfare state regimes into social democratic, conservative and liberal welfare states (Neyer, 2003).

**Figure 1 : Typology of early childhood systems**

<p><b>High Investment Public Provision Model:</b></p> <p>Found essentially in the Nordic countries. Children's rights to society's resources are widely recognised. Investment is over 1% of GDP. Programmes are designed to support the developmental potential of children and the needs of working parents. Little difference is made between care and education and services and investment patterns across the age group 1-6 years are continuous and integrated. This has been termed the Social Democratic Welfare State.</p>
<p><b>Low to Mid-Investment Pre-primary Model:</b></p> <p>Found in most European countries (outside Nordic group). Government provides large-scale educational services from 3 or 4 years to compulsory school age. Political discourse focuses on learning and laying the foundation for literacy and numeracy. Public investment is 0.4 to 1 percent of GDP. This has been termed the Conservative Welfare State.</p>
<p><b>Low Public Investment, Mixed Market Model:</b></p> <p>Found in Ireland, Australia, Canada, Korea and the U.S. High value is placed on individual family responsibility for children. National early childhood policies have traditionally been weak. Several departments share responsibility for policies affecting children. The childcare sector is weakly regulated and conceived of as a service for working mothers. Public investment is less than 0.5% of GDP. This has been termed the Liberal Welfare State.</p>

Source: Adapted from Bennett, 2005.

The Nordic child and family policy has historically focused on child well-being, female labour force participation and gender equality. **Social democratic** countries generally conform to a model of universalistic public services supported by high-level investment. These countries offer attractive maternity and parental leave provisions with generous subsidisation policies thereafter to ensure access to good quality care and education services for children and to facilitate work/life balance for parents.

While there has been diversity in investment and provision across the **conservative countries**, there is now an increasing movement amongst all towards more generous leave periods for parents and universal provision for children aged three to six (e.g. Italy, Portugal, Belgium, France, the Netherlands). Quality is emphasised as integral to effective service provision and services have at their core the integration of care and education for children in preparation for the commencement of primary schooling.

The basic tenet of child and family policy in **liberal welfare states** is the free market, where public investment tends to be low and the aim is to keep the social aspect of the State contained, needs-based and selective. In practice, this has meant that care of children has largely been viewed as a private responsibility, and family policy benefits have been targeted only at poor families and at children at risk. Lack of state intervention has meant that the majority of families in liberal welfare state regimes finance high childcare costs from their own private means and the bulk of day care is arranged unofficially, mainly through social and family networks. This situation has led to much concern about accessibility, quality and impact, as households with restricted incomes are often forced into low quality care, which may increase child or family related developmental risks (Hayes & Bradley, 2006; Leseman, 2002; NESF, 2005; NWCI, 2005).

Ireland's unprecedented economic growth, its subsequent impact on labour market behaviour and the increasingly diverse population have been important factors in the increased investment in, and policy attention to, early childhood care and education over the last decade (Hayes & Bradley, 2006; NWCI, 2005). As demand for early years places intensified, the consequences of the *laissez faire* approach adopted by successive governments became evident with many families experiencing substantial difficulties in balancing their work and family responsibilities. The historical position of women as carers within the home and the traditional approach adopted by successive governments, where care for children was viewed as a private matter has shifted, as the incidence of both parents earning becomes a regular pattern of family life. The long-standing neglect of early years services has meant that families have limited and costly choices and children are subject to services of variable quality with little guarantee of appropriate developmental care, education and support. The increasing pressure on the State to address and respond to shortages coincided with a more powerful ideological movement toward recognising the value of quality early childhood care and education to children in their own right. Consequently, all services accessed by children should reflect, at their core, the needs and rights of children as individual citizens within a democratic society.

**Key point**

The demand for early years services in Ireland has increased substantially over the last decade for a wide variety of reasons.

There has been a growth in attention to, discussion of and debate about children in Ireland over the last decade, generated by, among other things, the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989) in 1992 and the publication of *Our Children - Our Lives: The National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2000). The history and pattern of the policy split between care and education in Ireland has been documented elsewhere (Hayes, 2002). This split is evident particularly in the parallel development of a childcare (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999) and early childhood education policy (1999a) where there is differential funding available to services through the departments of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, Education and Science and, latterly, Health and Children (through the Office of Minister for Children). Furthermore, there are different inspection systems for services under different departmental auspices. The impact of the policy fragmentation becomes very clear when one considers the varied policy initiatives that emerged in the late 1990s. It can also be seen in terms of curriculum development for children aged four to six years where distinct differences in emphasis and focus exist between the more subject based Primary School Curriculum (1999b) and the emerging *Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004; 2005)<sup>4</sup>.

Liberal welfare states invest in educational services for primary, secondary and third-level students but steer clear of direct investment/subsidisation of early childhood care and education. Instead they employ a universal child benefit, which they argue can be used by parents to subsidise childcare costs if they so desire. In Ireland, child benefit payments increased substantially between 2000 and 2005 to address the two issues of child poverty and childcare. The 2006 budget introduced a new payment to parents, the Early Childhood Supplement (ECS). This annual payment of €1,000 for each child under 6 years is available to all parents and will cost the exchequer €350 million per annum (OMC, 2006). While increases in Child Benefit, and other child payments such as the ECS, form the basis for the government's strategy in tackling both childcare and child poverty, there is no evidence, national or international, that such increases have contributed, or can contribute to the development of accessible, affordable, sustainable, quality early childhood services. Neither have they assisted parents in meeting additional costs of caring for their children, despite the opportunities access to such services provide to parents (in taking up labour market, education or training opportunities) and children (in developmental and learning supports).

**Key point**

There is no evidence that increasing cash payments to parents improves access, affordability or quality of early years settings for children.

This 'market' approach to early childhood services, where the care element is removed from the broader context of early education and care, and treated as a commodity to assist parents work or continue education, has been severely criticised as inappropriate to the needs of children and it is seen to reduce the sector to one where a product - childcare - is out in the market and open to all the associated difficulties, particularly in poorer areas where the quality will be compromised (NWCI, 2005).

**Key point**

Structural adjustments to co-ordinate the development of the early years sector must be accompanied by associated conceptual adjustments.

The power of the structural over the conceptual in this field should not be underestimated. Recent structural changes made to enhance co-ordination and integration on issues relating to children, culminating in the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), offer an illustration. The OMC has

<sup>4</sup> The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.



incorporated responsibility for the existing childcare strategy (previously within the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform) and for early education by locating both divisions within the office. However, the new National *Childcare* Investment Programme (emphasis added) launched for 2006 - 2010 to support and develop a broad range of early years settings, misses the opportunity to capture the message of integration of care and education in the title of the programme. While there may be an explanation for the title of the initiative it is, nonetheless, a lost opportunity. The following section looks at curriculum and practice and how these too have been influenced by the dichotomy between care and education.

## Section 3: Curriculum and practice

The NCCA's consultative document notes that *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 learners with both care and educational needs, and rights* (NCCA, 2004, p. 8).

The current emerging pedagogy of early education in the western world is underpinned by systems of beliefs, which are increasingly interrogated and criticised so as not to become a stagnant orthodoxy (Moss, 2006; Penn, 2006). These include attention to the whole child; integrated rather than compartmentalised learning; starting from the children's own concerns, abilities and interests; valuing first-hand experience and play; ensuring time for self-regulated activity bouts; and opportunities for interaction with other children and with adults.

### Key point

Emphasising the dynamic nature of early education for all children has led to a move away from the more prescribed curriculum to learning frameworks based on broadly agreed principles of child development, learning and pedagogy.

There is also a trend to develop a pedagogy which shows respect for all children as valued human beings with a right to equality and opportunity (David, 1996, 1999b; Hayes, 2002, 2004; Nutbrown, 1996; UNCRC, 1989). The influence of some of these beliefs can be seen in a number of recent Irish policy documents including *The National Children's Strategy* (Department of Health and Children, 2000) which has identified the importance of considering the 'whole' child in policy development and both the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999b) and *Ready to Learn, the White Paper on Early Education* (Department of Education and Science, 1999a) which emphasised the value of integrated learning and the importance of starting with the children's own interests and concerns.

Emphasising the dynamic nature of early education and the multi-layered effect of the processes on those involved, and on the processes themselves, has led to a move away from drafting curriculum in the more traditional, prescribed manner typical of many primary and secondary school curricula. Recognising the child's role in the process of learning, compatible with the rise in attention from psychological, sociological and rights research (Hayes, 2001, 2002; David, 1999a) requires a shift in pedagogical approach from the traditional didactic approach frequently associated with the classroom and the approach associated with learning environments where children are seen as active participants in learning.

Such an approach presumes that all minds, even the very young, are capable of holding ideas and beliefs, which through discussion and interaction can be moved towards some shared frame of reference. *It is not simply that this mutualist view is 'child-centred' but it is much less patronising towards the child's mind. It attempts to build on exchange of understanding between the teacher and the child: to find in the intuitions of the child the roots of systematic knowledge, as Dewey urged* (Bruner, 1996, p.57). This is also reflected in the highly regarded Reggio Emilia approach, where children are characterised as strong and competent and the adults working with them listen carefully to their hundred languages (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 1995).

### Key point

Early childhood pedagogy increasingly reflects a sensitivity to child development, social context and the active, interactive nature of early learning.

Dewey's view of learning as the remaking of the old through union with the new resonates with contemporary attention to the wider context of learning. It captures the idea of construction and reconstruction of knowledge. From this perspective learning is characterised as active, social, dynamic and transforming. The actual process is a central element of the educational experience and one which deserves analysis in and of itself - resonating with the dynamic, bio-ecological model of human development proposed by

Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In many ways Dewey's views of child development and learning, which were ahead of their time, suffered from the absence of a contemporary psychological framework. Data emerging from current child development research support many of Dewey's assertions about how best to facilitate learning in a way that is meaningful to both child and a democratic society (Hilgard, 1996; Hayes, 2004).

The traditional polarity between adult-directed and child-initiated early education programmes can be characterised as a difference in focus: a focus on either an academic or an activity/play-based curriculum, on education or care. As the name suggests, an academic programme is guided by the content of the curriculum and the expected outcomes. On the other hand, an activity or play-based programme functions in the belief that learning occurs as a result of activity. Given our current understanding of the complex nature of learning, neither of these two approaches is sufficient in itself.

In the Irish context it appears, from the limited research available, that for the older preschool age group the academic, adult-directed approach predominates in primary school classrooms and the activity or play-based approach predominates in preschools (Hayes *et al*, 1997; Murphy, 2004; OECD, 2004). Differences in environmental factors and availability of resources across these different contexts may contribute to the different experiences by children. Finding a way to balance the two approaches across the range of settings for children from birth to six years that captures the dynamic, continuous process of education in practice – for both the child and the adult – is a challenge for early education.

There is an international trend towards reconsidering early years curriculum and practice for children from birth to six years to ensure that it takes account of contemporary child development theory, contextual variables and the dynamic interactions that are the essence of early education. In some countries, such as New Zealand and Scandinavia, this is being addressed by the emergence of national curriculum guidelines or frameworks to support educators in their practice. In other countries, for instance the United States, there is no national curriculum but professional bodies, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), have developed national guidelines for practice from children from birth through to eight years (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). This trend is leading to a move away from formal didactic modes of instruction and a loosening-up of centrally determined curriculum content. The result is greater attention to a pedagogical style that is child and context sensitive, emphasising the social, experiential and active nature of learning (Banks, 2000; Pascal & Bertram, 1993).

This move to understand and explain the dynamics of the early learning processes and practice presents a difficulty in separating out pedagogy from curriculum content. They are both central elements of a continuous process where the one depends on the other. This process is less bound by prescribed content in early education than in later stages of education, although to be effective in terms of development and learning the practice must be content-rich.

Academic curricula are content-focused and generally accompanied by defined and explicit learning goals, or desirable outcomes for the child. Goals and objectives are destinations to be reached by the child and in this way they limit the focus on process. Such emphasis has been criticised as being inappropriate for children under six years of age, with too much emphasis on the future and insufficient attention to the importance of day-to-day experiences or the 'natural' curriculum of the everyday (Siraj-Blatchford, 2003) on their actual development. Activity based curricula, on the other hand, attend more to the child's way of learning and emphasise broad aims rather than goals. This focus on aims allows for greater flexibility and responsiveness to the immediate learning context for the child. They too have been criticised, mainly for giving too much attention to the child and relegating the practitioner to a mere observer (McGough, 2002).

**Key point**

Where early learning is understood as an active, social, dynamic and transforming process the role of the adult as responsive and flexible becomes critical.

One of the major problems resulting from the ongoing arguments over curriculum types, goals and methods is that both sides in the struggle may overlook curriculum and practice methods beyond the traditional dichotomy, which can be seen to mirror the education and care dichotomy. The results of many studies suggest that both sides underemphasise and undervalue a third option. This third option is curriculum and pedagogy that address children's current interests and the progress of their intellectual development, as distinct from the direct instruction emphasis on academic learning and future outcomes or the child-initiated learning emphasis on children's play and self-initiated learning in the immediate present (Banks, 2000; Katz, 1999a, 1999b). This third approach is an integrating approach and focuses on the processes in the learning environment. Proponents argue that the curriculum is located within a firm set of principles rather than guided by a set of short-term objectives or goals. These principles allow early education to meet the immediate learning needs of the child while also allowing the adult to plan for future development and learning in line with the individual child's own interests, experience and developmental level. This integration and synthesis of care and education is the basis for proposing a nurturing pedagogical approach (Hayes, 2003a, 2004). The next section looks at effective learning.

## Section 4: Towards effective learning

The shift in attention away from what we should teach children in early education has led to questions about how best to achieve 'effective learning' through 'effective teaching'. There is sufficient understanding of development and learning to describe what 'effective learning' might look like in practice. In their description of intelligence-*in-practice*, Resnick & Nelson-Le Gall (1997) capture some of the features of effective learning. Children who are considered 'intelligent-in-practice' believe that they have the right (and the obligation) to understand and make things work; that problems can be analysed, that solutions often come from such analysis and that they are capable of that analysis. They have a variety of problem-solving skills and good intuitions about when to use them; they know how to ask questions, seek help and get enough information to solve problems and have habits of mind, or dispositions, that lead them to actively use these various skills and strategies for acquiring information. Central to this development is the learner's identity of self as a learner and a sense of belonging to the learning community (Carr, 1998; Pascal & Bertram, 1993; Sylva, 1994a). This attention to the active participation of the child resonates with parallel developments with respect to children's rights and children's visibility in the learning process in general. It challenges educators and policy makers to consider what it means to facilitate such active participation, particularly with children from birth to six years.

Bruner (1996) contends that

*the child should be aware of her thought processes, and that it is crucial for the pedagogical theorist and teacher alike to help her to become more meta-cognitive - to be aware of how she goes about her learning and thinking as she is about the subject matter she is studying. Achieving skill and accumulating knowledge are not enough (p. 64).*

The affective and cognitive abilities described can be developed through attending to the quality of interactions, communication and relations between individuals and their social environment, that is to the combined elements of care and education. This, in turn, can reinforce the development of a sense of belonging, connectedness and community identity; critical foundations for later educational, emotional and social success.

Current research suggests a need to actually emphasise the affective dimension over the traditional cognitive focus of learning (Ball, 1994; Daly 2002; Egertson, 2003; Hayes, 2004). The evidence suggests that early education that emphasises the affective dimensions of learning and those cognitive skills associated with the planning and organisation of knowledge positively influences children's later academic cognitive development in terms of content knowledge and literacy and numeracy skills.

### Key point

Current early educational and developmental research suggests that where the affective and meta-cognitive dimensions are emphasised, later academic cognitive development - in terms of content knowledge, literacy and numeracy skills - is positively enhanced.

Fostering the development of both the meta-cognitive and affective dimensions of learning in early education can enable children to become ready, willing and able learners (Claxton, 1990; Carr, 2001b). Such development and learning is particularly important in children from birth to six as it facilitates the acquisition, comprehension, retention and application of what is learned, assists learning efficiency, critical thinking and problem-solving and gives children control or self-regulation over thinking and learning processes and products (Hartman, 1998; Kuhn, 1999; Larkin, 2002). For practitioners to assist this process they must consider how best to facilitate the development of affective competence, meta-cognitive awareness and management of cognitive processes within each child. They must, in essence, assist children in learning how to learn, in recognising themselves as competent and masterful learners who can explore and problem-solve and are sufficiently self-aware to seek assistance when necessary. The language and content context for such practice is guided by the experiences and interests of the children augmented by the practitioner's ability to extend such experience and interest.

**Key point**

The adult role in early education is critical to children becoming competent and masterful learners from the earliest age.

Such an approach recognises the educative role of care as nurture. Practising a nurturing pedagogy both challenges and permits practitioners to give time to planning for the 'soft' and messy aspects of early learning and to encourage playful interaction, exploration, dialogue and collaborative learning to encourage and support babies', toddlers' and young children's learning. The learning environment, and children's interaction with it, should be challenging and rich in both language and content. This can be either directly, in terms of the content of social interactions with an adult or advanced peer, or indirectly, through the carefully considered provision of materials, objects, activities and opportunities.

A nurturing pedagogy fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge. Where the adult is observing and listening to children and reflecting on these observations, the curriculum plan is based on engagement with children, assessment of their interests and developmental level as well as their needs and the aims of education. Through a reflective and nurturing pedagogy adults can also identify difficulties in individual development and move to address them, either in the context of the classroom setting or through outside interventions and supports. Implicit in the concept of a nurturing pedagogy is the idea that pedagogy is an integrating process, a guide to an emergent and responsive curriculum (Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001; Edwards *et al*, 1995) and a medium for assessment (Carr, 2001a; Rogoff, 1997). Finally, a nurturing pedagogy extends the underlying idea of respect for the child as a participating partner in the learning process while at the same time recognising and articulating a mechanism for respecting the dual nature of early education as care and education. The following section looks at some of the professional development implications for developing a nurturing pedagogy.

## Section 5: Professional development for early childhood care and education

It follows that the role of the adult in early education is central to the effectiveness of this pedagogy. The role of the early years practitioner is multi-layered (Athey, 1990, Bowman *et al*, 2001; Spodek, 1996). Analysis of the various tasks required uncovers a group of functions, which fall into management and educational roles, which are intricately interconnected in practice. The management role encompasses planning for children's learning, resourcing and organising opportunities for learning, recording and documenting children's learning, evaluating practice and adapting to the interests and needs of children. The educational role involves reflective observation to inform practice, supporting and extending learning in groups and with individual children, understanding what is happening as children learn and responding to this understanding and working in partnership with other adults and children themselves in the process that is early education.

The importance of well-educated practitioners is highlighted in the research into effective, quality early childhood care and education (Edwards *et al.*, 1995; Pianta, Howes, Burchinal, Bryant, Clifford, Early & Barbarin, 2005; Weiss, 2005). Bowman and her colleagues (2001) expand on the importance of the adult in early education, particularly identifying those characteristics to be developed through education and training. Well-educated practitioners are confident in their knowledge of the sophisticated nuances of child development; recognise and respond to the normative and dynamic dimensions of development and are familiar with the skills and knowledge appropriate to the age group in their setting; they are careful and sympathetic listeners and respectful to children; they negotiate meaning rather than impose it; they are reflective observers who are able to respond to children and provide sensitive feedback (Abbott & Moylett, 1999; Carr, 2001a; David, 1999b; Katz, 1996; Nutbrown, 1996). Such practices are the manifestation of a nurturing pedagogy and embody a trust in the educative value of care in early education.

### Key point

Well-educated early years practitioners contribute to and sustain quality early education, which in turn, yields positive short and long-term benefits for children.

Adults working in this way practice in a content-rich environment but do not come equipped with a fixed corpus of knowledge; rather, they help the child to find their own meaning in a shared learning environment. Where early education has too strong a knowledge or content focus, emphasising the need for children to know facts before they can apply their learning effectively, adults may become uncertain in their role, believing that they have to be the fount of all knowledge. Katz (1996) notes that in her experience it is this belief that makes students very anxious, and can lead them to focus their efforts at preparation and planning rather than thinking about appropriate teaching and learning strategies. She makes the point that teacher education, for the early years in particular, must help students distinguish between 'know-how' and knowledge in a way that allows the integration of both. Recognising the centrality of pedagogy, as well as curriculum, to effective early education is a challenge and requires extensive knowledge accompanied by a trust in the ability and interest of children to learn. In order not to become 'paralysed by uncertainty', practitioners must be able to practice with optimum confidence in the rightness of their actions based on robust evidence of child development (Katz, 1996, p.145). However, she also notes that they ought also be imbued with a healthy scepticism and an ability to question their own practice.

Johnson (1988) believes that all practitioners come to their practice with informal theories about children's learning and development, informed by their training and their experiences. They derive these from experience and often own them much more readily than they accept the implications of theory and research from so called child development experts. These implicit beliefs that practitioners have about child development and how children learn are termed 'folk pedagogy' by Bruner (1996) and do need to be challenged in the context of contemporary understandings. Professional education and training for early education practitioners must include a strong element of child development along with subject knowledge and principles of practice. The potential of the concept of a nurturing pedagogy as an integrating mechanism

for care and education and a challenge to mainstream training for those working with children in education and care contexts has been considered (Hayes, 2004; Petrie, 2004). Petrie notes that *at the level of practice, pedagogy could foster a unifying ethos across settings and age groups, with many workers in the children's sector reconstructed as pedagogues, sharing common values and approaches* (Petrie, 2004, p. 295).

There is no doubt that a move towards more informal practice will require a significant shift in approach away from the more traditional, didactic style of teaching. Dewey (1938/1998) and others (Bruner, 1996; Carr, 2001a; David, 1999a) have noted that the more informal the pedagogy the greater the need for careful structuring of the learning environment. This structure is not reflected in a particularly ordered or rigid routine or environment. Rather it is expressed in practice through carefully informed and reflective planning from a rich knowledge base. To effect such a change in practice will require a significant review of and investment in pre-service and in-career education for all those working with children, whatever the setting (Coolahan, 2002; Dunphy, 2000; Department of Education and Science, 2001; Department of Education and Science, 2002; McGough, 2002; Sugrue, 1990).

**Key point**

Recognising the centrality of informal pedagogy, as well as curriculum, to effective early education for all ages is a challenge. It requires both a trust in the educational value of the everyday and in the ability and interest of children to learn.

The challenges should not be underestimated. The care and education dichotomy has led to a situation where the care element in early childhood care and education is regarded as the childcare dimension. The dichotomy allows care to be characterised within a child development framework whilst de-emphasising the educational nature of this work. This privileges education over care and can be seen in aspects of education, pay, conditions of service and influence (McFarlane & Lewis, 2004; Irish Times, 19th April, 2006).

If we are to move towards a real acknowledgement of the critical value of both care and education in all early years settings we will also have to contend with the implications this will have for the professionalisation of the sector. A well-educated workforce working directly with children, sensitive to the complexity of the role, will enhance the quality of early learning experiences for children and ultimately benefit us all (Petrie, 2004; Cameron, 2004). Continuity of experience for children within and across settings, through a shared understanding of practice among practitioners, can contribute to limiting any negative impact of transitions across different settings and facilitate and enhance learning. The opportunities presented by a shift of focus from the care and education dichotomy to a consideration of the integrated, and integrating process of early childhood care and education are extensive and challenging. They require a significant change in understanding early education at a policy and practice level and a reform in the education of all those working with children in early years settings. These opportunities and challenges provide a rich environment in which to develop an early childhood care and education system that reflects contemporary Ireland and draws on international research within our unique cultural context to the benefit of all our children.

## Concluding comments

The independent development of the educational and childcare sectors has been identified as one of the key problems facing the reform and development of early education in Ireland as, traditionally the communication between the two sectors has been rather limited (ERC, 1998). The power and influence of this historical distinction can be seen in the government *White Paper on Early Childhood Education, Ready to Learn* (Department of Education and Science, 1999a) which commits to the underlying principle that *for young children, education and care should not be separated* (p.4) while at the same time noting that *care is the dominant requirement of children aged less than 3 years and ... education is a more significant need of older children.* (p. 4). Despite references to the need to balance the care and educational aspects of early education there is a tendency to underestimate the educative role of caring.

A significant shift in understanding the role of care in practice requires an explicit acknowledgement of the critical contribution of the interpersonal aspect of early education. To emphasise this it has been argued that there is a need to reconceptualise care as nurture in order that its status as an educative dimension be enhanced. The caring responsibility of the adult - where it recognises that care should be more than merely 'minding' - gives an enhanced educational role to it. The idea of considering care as nurture gives it an active connotation with a responsibility on the adult to provide nurturance and foster learning rather than to simply mind or protect the child. Such a shift in emphasis would raise the expectations we have of practitioners in early education. The role of the adult is crucial and multi-faceted and ranges from listener, questioner, advisor, to demonstrator, actor, sympathiser, negotiator, assessor and guide. It also includes the role of 'learner', a reflective observer of children who learns from observation and uses this as the basis for pedagogical practice. If adults are to nurture children's learning as part of the educative process they must develop skills of observation and reflection to allow for the non-intrusive planning and provision of a learning environment that supports and extends children's own learning. In order to nurture an adult must inter-actively nourish, rear, foster, train and educate the child. To nurture requires an engaged, bidirectional level of interaction and confers on the early years practitioner an enhanced, educational role. Such an approach extends the underlying idea of respect for the child as a participating partner in the learning process while at the same time recognising and articulating a mechanism for respecting the dual nature of early education as care and education.

In the literature on developmentally appropriate practice in early education, efforts have been made to encourage practitioners away from didactic practice by giving care and education equal status. However, attempts to raise the status of care in early education, such as the coining of the term 'educare' (Caldwell, 1989), have not been very successful and have been criticised as being operationally weak (Karlsson & Pramling, 2003). This paper argues that a more useful notion for practice is that of a 'nurturing pedagogy' which recognises the educative role of care as nurture and both challenges and permits practitioners to give time to planning for the 'soft' and messy aspects of early learning and to encourage playful interaction, exploration, dialogue and collaborative learning to encourage and support babies', toddlers' and young children's learning.

A nurturing pedagogy 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 and fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge. Where the adult is observing and listening to children and reflecting on these observations, the curriculum plan is based on an assessment of their interests and developmental level as well as their needs and the aims of education. A reflective and nurturing pedagogy allows for attention to individual development and moves to address difficulties, should they emerge, either in the context of the immediate setting or through outside interventions and supports.

Central to the concept of a nurturing pedagogy is the idea that pedagogy provides a unique integration space for care and education and is, itself, a form of assessment and a guide to an emergent and responsive curriculum. Curriculum, assessment and practice are intimately intertwined in early education and care. To progress change in Irish early education policy and practice it will be necessary for there to be structural



reform, already beginning with the establishment of an Early Childhood Unit within the Office of Minister for Children, and leadership in curriculum reform. The current work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on developing an early learning framework across the ages from birth to six, in consultation with the whole sector, affords an exciting opportunity to break down structural and psychological barriers for the benefit of children, families and society in general.

There is a need for a significant investment in early childhood education in Ireland and an ongoing review of the early educational opportunities for children up to six years of age. Such a review will require continued research into early education in Ireland and reform of early childhood education curriculum and practice with implications for policy, practice and capacity building through training and education. It will also require a shift to supporting appropriate, effective and quality early education so that Irish children can experience enhancing care and education in learning environments that are empowering and enabling for them in the here and now while guiding them along the path through lifelong learning well equipped with the necessary learning dispositions, knowledge, values and skills to succeed and to be active citizens in a democratic society.

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National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)



# Aistear

*Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige*  
*The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*

**Perspectives on the relationship  
between education and care in  
early childhood: A research paper**

**Executive Summary**

# **Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood: A research paper**

## **Executive Summary**

By Nóirín Hayes, PhD

Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA.

# Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood

## An executive summary

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 Ireland. This division allows care to be characterised within a framework that de-emphasises the educational nature of the work. This privileges education over care and is manifest in aspects of professional education, pay, conditions of service, and influence. It is the contention of the paper *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood* that quality early years provision across all services and ages is best described by the term early education; this synthesising concept requires a rich understanding of the educative nature of care whilst demanding attention to the caring role of education.

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. It does so by considering the context within which early education is currently developing, nationally and internationally. In particular it 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).

## Education, care and policy development

The term 'early childhood care and education' is gaining a wide currency across the sector in Ireland. Both the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) use slight variations of the term in the title of their influential reports (OECD, 2004; NESF, 2005) and the introduction to *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (2006) notes that the term *Early Childhood Care and Education* has strong endorsement from the diverse range of stakeholders in the provision of services, as it reinforces the inseparable nature of care and education essential to the provision of quality early experiences (CECDE, 2006, p. 3). However, the OECD cautions that *it is clear that a national policy on the early education and care of young children in Ireland is still in its initial stages*. Care and education are still treated separately (OECD, 2004, p. 6). It seems that simply headlining the two concepts together within the phrase early childhood care and education is insufficient to integrating them conceptually, politically or practically.

The paper contends that the degree to which a state involves itself in early education and the extent to which early education is regarded as either a care/welfare or an educational aspect of policy influences the funding, focus and the status of early education and, in turn, the process and quality of early education itself. It further argues that the 'market' approach to early childhood services, where the care element is removed from the broader context of early education and care, and treated as a commodity to assist parents' work or continue their education predominates in Ireland. This policy approach is criticised as insensitive to the development and learning needs and rights of young children.

## Curriculum and practice

There is an international trend towards reconsidering early years curriculum and practice for children from birth to six years to ensure that it takes account of contemporary child development theory, contextual variables and the dynamic interactions that are the essence of quality early education.

In its review of contemporary research the paper illustrates that successful early education facilitates the child in active learning where learning environments are well planned and where staff are well trained, confident and supported in their work. The positive impact of early education is found across all social

groups but is strongest in children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Effective learning in early childhood is exemplified by positive aspirations, task commitment, social skills, responsibility, and feelings of efficacy within the child.

The role of the adult is central to the quality of early education and the paper presents evidence that a dynamic process approach to practice, integrating care and education, offers more for children's positive development and learning than either an academic (education) or a play-based (care) approach alone. The evidence suggests that early education which emphasises the affective dimensions of learning and those cognitive skills associated with the planning and organisation of knowledge positively influences children's later academic development in terms of content knowledge and literacy and numeracy skills.

Such an approach to early education recognises the educative role of care as nurture and both challenges and permits practitioners to give time to planning for the 'soft', affective and difficult to measure aspects of early learning and development such as aspirations, social skills, motivation, organisation, learner identity, and confidence. Furthermore, it challenges adults to encourage playful interaction, exploration, dialogue, and collaborative learning. Such practice supports young children's learning in a rich learning environment and, it is argued, is best exemplified by a 'nurturing pedagogy'.

## **Professional development**

The importance of well-educated practitioners is highlighted in the research into effective, quality early childhood education. It follows that the role of the adult is central to this effectiveness. Well-trained practitioners are confident in their knowledge of the sophisticated nuances of child development; recognise and respond to the normative and dynamic dimensions of development and are familiar with the skills and knowledge appropriate to the children in their setting. Such practices are manifest in a 'nurturing pedagogy' and embody a trust in the educative value of care in early education. The paper concludes that professional education and training for early education practitioners should include a strong element of child development along with subject knowledge and principles of practice.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the many policy references for the need to balance care and education in early education, the evidence indicates that there continues to be a tendency to underestimate the educative role of caring. A significant shift in understanding the role of care in practice requires an explicit acknowledgement of the critical contribution of the interpersonal and relational aspects of early education. To emphasise this it is argued that there is a need to re-conceptualise care as nurture in order that its status as an educative dimension be enhanced. The concept of a 'nurturing pedagogy' recognises the educative role of care as nurture, the importance of relationships and the role of playful interaction, exploration, dialogue, and collaborative learning in supporting young children's learning. Central to the concept is the idea that pedagogy provides a unique integration space for care and education and is, itself, a form of assessment and a guide to an emergent and responsive early years curriculum.

There is a need for a significant investment in early childhood education in Ireland and an ongoing review of the early educational opportunities for children up to six years of age. Reform of early childhood education curriculum and practice with implications for policy, practice and capacity building through training and education is also needed. This will also require a shift to supporting appropriate, effective and quality early education so that Irish children can experience enhancing care and education in learning environments that are empowering and enabling for them in the here and now while guiding them along the path through lifelong learning well equipped with the necessary learning dispositions, knowledge, values, and skills to succeed and to be active citizens in a democratic society. The paper welcomes the current work of the NCCA in developing an early learning curriculum framework from birth to age six across the wide variety of early educational settings. This work affords an exciting opportunity for the reform and development of early education in Ireland.

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National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)



# Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige  
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework



**Children's early learning  
and development**

A research paper

# **Children's early learning and development**

**A research paper**

By Geraldine French  
Independent Early Years Specialist

This research paper was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).



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## Glossary

*Additional needs* is a term which acknowledges that some children have additional individual needs such as those resulting from a disability or a specific learning difficulty or may have a continuing health condition that affects their life.

*Anthroposophy* is a philosophy coined by Steiner, which rejected Judeo-Christian theology in favour of the mystical, spiritual insights of human beings.

*Anti-discriminatory practice* involves valuing children, protecting them from discrimination, challenging discriminatory practices, and providing positive models and images for children from a young age.

*Assimilation and accommodation* are aspects of Piaget's theory. In assimilation, children match information, concepts, and skills arising from interaction with the environment with previously formed mental structures. Accommodation, on the other hand, requires that children modify structures in order to make sense of the new information or concepts, or to represent new skills.

*Constructivism* is the psychological theory emanating from Piaget, Vygotsky and others, which proposes that humans construct their own knowledge, intelligence and morality through a series of stages and often in collaboration with others.

*Critical or sensitive periods* are windows of opportunity in time, where a child is most receptive to learn with the least amount of effort.

*Culture* infers an identity which everyone has, based on a number of factors from memories, ethnic identity, family attitudes to child rearing, class, money, religious or other celebrations, or division of family roles according to gender or age. Culture evolves for individuals and communities.

*Development* is the process by which a person changes and grows over time, influenced by both experiences and physiological changes. It has two dimensions: normative (following a prescribed pattern) and dynamic (depending on time and experience).

*Developmentally appropriate practice* is educational practice that embraces children's developmental stages. This term has been criticised in the past because it is based on universal laws of development, emerging from a Western ideology, and without definition may *not* be appropriate depending on the cultural context (Woodhead, 1996). The term coined in the literature as an alternative, is *practice appropriate to the context of early development*.

*Disequilibrium* is the opposite of equilibrium (see below); when a child's previously held ideas are challenged. Conflict can create disequilibrium within a child.

*Early childhood* is defined as the period before compulsory schooling; in Ireland the early childhood period extends from birth to six years.

*Emergent curriculum* is a curriculum that arises from children's interests and adults' understanding of children's needs.

*Equilibrium* as conceived by Piaget (1968, p. 101) is the *compensation resulting from the activities of the subject in response to external intrusions*. In other words we continually strive for balance between understanding what we know (assimilation) and adjusting to the new (accommodation). This is an active process leading to the concept of active learning.

*Gifts and Occupations* are materials Froebel developed to use with infants and young children.

*Interpretive theoretical perspectives*, or approaches to the study of children, address the fundamental question of how children come to invest cultural resources with meaning.

*Learning* is a complex, dynamic and interactive process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.

*Oracy* is the expertise, skill and knowledge involved in effective verbal communication.

*Parent* is used to refer to the primary caregiver. This caregiver could be a grandparent, step-parent, guardian, foster parent or relation other than the father or mother.

*Pedagogy* from the sociology of childhood is *analytically distinct* and *complementary* to curriculum (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004, p. 137). Pedagogy is defined as the *practice or the art, science, craft of teaching; therefore to be a pedagogue is to be a teacher; it refers to the interactive process between teacher and learner and the learning environment (which includes family and community)* (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004, p. 138). It is about knowing what is appropriate or less appropriate for children (van Manen, 1999).

*Reflective practice* involves adults thinking about their work with children and planning and implementing the curriculum to best support the children's interests and strengths. Observing, listening and discussing with colleagues are key components of reflective practice.

*Scaffolding* is a process by which adults support and guide children's learning, enabling children to reach to the next level of ability, beyond their own personal capability at that time. The term was coined by Bruner building on Vygotsky's work.

*Socio-culturalism* is interpreted broadly to incorporate *the range of perspectives such as social-constructivism, activity theory and post-modern views of co-construction that are currently influential in early childhood care and education* in Anning, Cullen and Fleer (2004, p. 1).

*Zone of proximal development* according to Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) is *the distance between the [child's] actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the [child's] level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.*

## Introduction

Ireland has enjoyed profound economic, demographic, cultural and social change since the 1980s. An improvement in public finances, lower inflation, economic growth, manufacturing output and export growth have become hallmarks of life in Ireland at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The Central Statistics Office (CSO, 2005) observes that the population in Ireland has increased by over twelve per cent to more than four million in the period 1995-2004. The Office noted the employment rate in Ireland rose from fifty-four per cent in 1995 to sixty-five and a half per cent in 2004 with a reversal of the trend of emigration toward immigration contributing to an increasingly diverse and multicultural society. However, as the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF, 2005) report highlighted, in spite of our healthy economy, social deficits - including educational disadvantage, limited childcare and barriers to full engagement in society for people with a disability - require more attention. With increased participation in employment by women - from thirty-five per cent in 1990 to over forty-nine per cent in 2004 (CSO, 2005) there is a growing demand for childcare places. In addition, according to the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE, 2005, p. 6), parents are increasingly interested and concerned with *their children's holistic development, including their cognitive, emotional and social development*.

The changing nature of childhood itself in the 21st Century has become a persistent public concern. In response to a debate which emerged in the United Kingdom (UK) regarding the escalating incidences of childhood depression and children's behavioural and developmental conditions Murray (The Irish Times, September 2006) reported that there was cause for real concern. Responsible parents and professionals in Ireland have also issued warnings about the stresses on children, the erosion of innocence, the sexualisation of children and the influence of inappropriate media images on the heart and mind of the child (Daly, 2004; Murray, September 2006). Furthermore there is anxiety regarding the rise of obesity, diabetes, anorexia and bulimia among children, the emergence of the child consumer with a disposable income, and the increase in substance and alcohol abuse, violence, and self-harm amongst young people. These problems are complex, and without a ready solution. While the forthcoming National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland launched in January 2007 (*Growing Up in Ireland*, led by the Economic and Social Research Institute and Trinity College, Dublin) will give some insights into children's lives, we need to engage in authentic debate about how we are going to improve children's well-being. Rather than bemoaning the demise of childhood it is vital that we celebrate the benefits we have gained regarding educational opportunities, dental and health improvements, greater gender and social equality which are greatly superior to those experienced by children in the past.

Murray (The Irish Times, September 16, 2006) advised that we can *challenge what is inappropriate to their developmental needs*. Children have a need for play, for *space to initiate their own creative, imaginative, symbolic worlds, not just be passive recipients of prefabricated fantasy*. Children need time and limits. Children also have a human right to be protected from the mental violence of age-inappropriate media exposure, uncensored chat rooms and internet marketing. The Children's Rights Alliance (2007) advocated that the expected referendum on children's rights within the Irish Constitution should result in an amendment whereby the Constitution includes a statement highlighting that the State values and respects childhood and will facilitate children to reach their full potential and be protected from all forms of physical, emotional, sexual abuse and from exploitation. As a society we must ensure that children's developmental needs are met and their rights protected.

This research paper *Children's early learning and development* responds to the question - *how should we understand the child as a young learner?* Informed by traditional and contemporary literature on education, health sciences, sociology of childhood, anthropology, cultural studies, and philosophy, a range of perspectives on how children learn and develop are explored. The paper situates the discussion on how children learn and develop in early childhood, in Ireland. In doing this, it draws particular attention to relevant legislative and policy developments. The paper then explores key features of the processes through which children learn and develop. As part of the preparatory work for the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>1</sup>, the

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<sup>1</sup> The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed a document entitled, *Early Childhood Framework, Background Paper* (2001). This document presented a review of literature concerning how children learn and develop, and a review of early childhood curriculum materials used nationally and internationally. During the development of the paper and later the consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (2004), the NCCA identified common principles of early childhood care and education. These principles are reflected in the headings used to organise this research paper on how children learn and develop. The paper looks at how we should conceptualise the child before going on to discuss equality and diversity, active learning and meaning making, relationships, language and communication, the learning environment and play. The paper then looks at the whole child in context and at early childhood curriculum. The concluding comments clarify and summarise the key messages from across the paper.

## The legislative and policy context

Ireland has experienced unprecedented change regarding early childhood care and education legislation and policy, over the last decade and a half. Legislative developments include:

- Child Care Act (Department of Health and Children, 1991)
- Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations, Part VII of Child Care Act, 1991, published in 1996 (Department of Health and Children) – revised in 2006
- Ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1992)
- Children First - National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Department of Health and Children, 1999) - currently under review
- Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (Department of Education and Science, 2004).

Early childhood care and education (ECCE) outside families and the junior and senior infant classes in primary schools, is provided by the private, voluntary and community sector. This results in a great diversity of service provision which includes nurseries, crèches, playgroups, grúpa naíonraí, childminders and pre-schools. Different settings operate within different philosophies such as Froebel, High/Scope, Montessori, Steiner, and play-based philosophies, while others such as infant classes are underpinned by the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b). Whereas there are regulations for pre-school settings and a national curriculum for children in the formal education system, there are no universal standards covering all children from birth to six years currently in ECCE settings. Although there are no standard qualifications required for the adults who work in ECCE settings outside of infant classes there are, however, a number of initiatives as outlined below, that concern the area of ECCE.

Regarding policy, the National Forum for Early Childhood Education (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1998) was instrumental in informing *Ready to Learn: The White Paper on Early Education* (Department of Education and Science, 1999a) and the establishment of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) in 2002. The CECDE has developed *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* (NQF/ECE) (2006). The development of *Síolta* marks a milestone in the quest for quality early childhood education provision in Ireland and provides a reference point for all those involved in early childhood care and education services in this quest. The *OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy* in Ireland (DES, 2004) has enhanced our knowledge of the sector. Other significant developments include the *National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) Report on Early Childhood Care and Education* (2005). Still to be developed is the strategy to support families (forthcoming, Department of Health and Children) to guide the development and operation of appropriate services, and the Department of Social and Family Affairs' Family Policy (forthcoming). The newly established Office of the Minister for Children, is a welcome development in response to the need for increased co-ordination of early childhood care and education across the Departments of Health and Children, Education and Science, and Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

## A framework for early learning

Another significant development which relates directly to this paper is the consultation organised by the NCCA and summarised in the document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning, Final Consultation Report* (NCCA, 2005). The consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004) which underpinned the consultation, paved the way for a national curriculum framework to support children's early learning and development from birth to six years. This 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.* (NCCA, 2004, p. 4)

In exploring the image of the child as an active and inquisitive young learner, the consultative document used the terms learning and development interchangeably. The purpose of this research paper is to tease out how learning and development take place. Informed by an extensive review of literature, the paper identifies and discusses important aspects of this learning and development. The discussion draws on many disciplines bringing us to the contemporary view of children as learners which underpins the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>2</sup>.

There is a long history and interest in early learning and development from Plato (427-347 B.C.) to the present, with each generation of theorists having integrated and transformed past discoveries. New ideas are constantly emerging from the natural and social sciences, from philosophy, sociology, and introspective psychology, all operating within differing ethical, political and social traditions. As such, each theory in itself represents one possible way of thinking and acting. The NCCA hopes that this paper will stimulate and encourage dialogue, reflection and action about how we in Ireland understand how children learn and develop, and how they can be supported in this. The paper therefore is a stimulus for dialogue rather than a statement of fact. As articulated by New (1999, p. 281) *there is a need for adults to struggle aloud and together ... knowing that their choices create as well as preclude opportunities for children's current learning and future lives.*

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<sup>2</sup> As noted earlier, the *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

## Early learning and development

As outlined earlier, in the document *Early Childhood Framework, Background Paper* (2001), the NCCA highlighted common principles which underpinned the curriculum materials shaping early childhood practice in Ireland. These principles emerged from a review of the literature in the field of early childhood research, and from curriculum guidelines including the Infant Curriculum as part of the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b). This paper provides a more detailed review of the research literature and uses the principles as lenses to highlight important messages which inform contemporary thinking about how children learn and develop. The headings used to guide the discussion are:

- equality and diversity
- active learning and meaning making
- relationships
- communication and language
- the environment
- play
- the whole child in context
- early childhood curriculum.

One of the oldest and most central theoretical debates within psychology and philosophy concerns whether children's learning and development is as a result of their genetic inheritance (nature) or the influence of the environment in which they find themselves (nurture). What is clear is that both genetic and environmental factors play vital roles in a child's life chances (French and Murphy, 2005). Children's experiences in their early years have a profound impact on their later social, emotional and cognitive development (Home-Start International, 2002).

### Socio-cultural learning and development

Early childhood care and education has been challenged by a *theoretical seachange that has seen individualistic developmental explanations for learning and development replaced by theories that foreground the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning* (Anning, Cullen and Fleer, 2004, p. 1). Current thinking attests to the importance if not the domination of social and cultural processes (Rogoff, 1990; Bruner, 1996). From this perspective, the separate and distinct processes of learning and development (see Glossary, pp. 4-5) are inextricably intertwined and are *embedded in the context of social relationships* (Rogoff, 1990, p. 8). Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological System's Theory* (1989) provides a framework which situates individual development in the context in which it occurs. Therefore, the child develops not in isolation but through relationships within the family, neighbourhood, community, and society. This socio-cultural understanding of learning and development underpins this research paper.

### How should we conceptualise the child?

Any exploration of how children learn and develop is informed by a particular view of the child. The NCCA's consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004) is premised on the understanding of the child as *rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and most of all connected to adults and to other children* (Malaguzzi, 1993a, p. 10). Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) enhanced this view of an intelligent child, a co-creator of knowledge; a researcher actively seeking to make meaning of the world. This understanding of children challenges Locke's child as one of knowledge and culture reproducer. This child was considered to be a *tabula rasa* or empty vessel needing to be filled with knowledge, skills and dominant cultural values and to be made ready to learn and for school (Krogh and Slentz, 2001). In addition the innocence of Rousseau's child is challenged—the image of the child enjoying a golden age of

life, uncorrupted by the world (Seefeldt, 1999). Finally, the child as *an essential being of universal properties and inherent capabilities whose development is innate, biologically determined and follows general laws* is also challenged (Dahlberg *et al*, 1999, p. 46). Reggio Emilia chose to move from this perspective to understanding the child as an individual with rights (Philips, 2001). These past understandings of the child as a learner create an image of the needy child. Furthermore they negate the current conception of the child as a young citizen (Dunne, 2005).

### **New understandings of children**

New ways of conceptualising children arise from the sociology of childhood (Connell, 1987; James and Prout, 1990; Prout and James 1997). Childhood and all social objects (class, gender, race, and ethnicity) are seen as being interpreted, debated, and defined in processes in social action. Corsaro (1987) suggests that, children and adults alike are seen as active participants in the social construction of childhood and in the reproduction of their shared culture. Children are seen as having agency and power within their own right, not just in relation to the social constructions assigned to them by adults (Prout and James, 1997). Traditional theories viewed children as consumers of the culture established by adults. This new construction of childhood is oriented towards the child's present rather than the future.

The image of the child-developing-in-context (Rogoff, 1990) provides for a more dynamic conception of learning and development and opens the lens through which we observe children. The child's participation in multiple socio-cultural contexts of the family, the community and society at large is recognised. In doing so, we can choose to see the child as having *surprising and extraordinary strengths and capabilities* (Malaguzzi, 1993b, p. 73). Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences (linguistic, musical, logico-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, among others) celebrates the variety of human capabilities and expression. Collectively, these views give rise to the principles underpinning the consultative document (NCCA, 2004) and ultimately the *Framework for Early Learning*.

### **Equality and diversity**

All children are individuals, unique in their abilities, from a rich diversity of backgrounds, beliefs and cultures. All children have the right to be treated with respect, positive regard and dignity. Articles 29 and 30 of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) state clearly that respect and recognition for the child's own cultural identity, values and language (and that of others), should be part of his/her education. This section explores the importance of attending to diversity issues when working and learning with children.

### **Towards inclusive practice**

There is clear evidence that children's positive concepts of ethnic identity are related to self-esteem, reduced levels of depression and optimism (Martinez and Dukes, 1997; Roberts, Phinney, Masses, Chen, Roberts, and Romero, 1999). It is also known that biases can develop very early in young children (Krogh and Slentz, 2001). Through participating in everyday activities/routines and play, children absorb messages from people and the environment regarding their identity and social values. Bonel and Lindon (1993) noted that practitioners should be aware of and respect areas of *difference* such as gender, faith/no faith or family structure. These form part of a child's home experience and individual identity. *Difference* in this sense should be respected in every aspect of early childhood work. By exploring our own and other cultural daily practices/routines, we gain appreciation of our common humanity as well as providing the optimal environment for children's cognitive, emotional and social growth (Lave and Wenger, 1992).

Murray and O'Doherty (2001) strongly advocate the anti-bias approach for diversity education, which is relevant for all children in Ireland including ethnic minority children and dominant culture children. This approach goes beyond cultural issues and also addresses class, language, faith, gender, and disability (Derman-Sparks, 1989). All forms of bias are challenged, and children are supported in developing empathy and thus recognising and resisting bias or discrimination. The underlying intent of an anti-bias approach to

learning is to support children and adults in becoming critical thinkers and becoming active in building a more caring, just society for all. However, the anti-bias approach although important, may not be sufficient. Tobin (2006) suggests that to better serve children from newly arrived international families there is a need to shift from an anti-bias to a cultural negotiation paradigm. Cultural negotiation involves listening deeply to and engaging with families and subsequently modifying settings based on their requirements.

The NCCA (2005) produced guidelines called *Intercultural Education in the Primary School* to support teachers in enabling children to respect and celebrate diversity, to promote equality, and to challenge unfair discrimination. Intercultural education *recognises the normality of diversity in all areas of human life. It sensitises the learner to the idea that humans have naturally developed a range of different ways of life, customs and worldviews, and that this breadth of human life enriches all of us* (NCCA, 2005, p. 3). Similarly, the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b) promotes *tolerance and respect for diversity in both the school and the community* (Introduction, Department of Education and Science, 1999b, p. 28).

## Summary

These different but related approaches require a consciousness of diversity issues in all aspects of the curriculum among practitioners who work with young children in order to provide a truly inclusive learning experience for the child. Inclusive practice is best supported in settings where democracy is a guiding principle and where strategies for capturing children's voices are adopted (Clarke and Moss, 2001). Ultimately this means practitioners recognising a broad range of issues as valid topics for inclusive dialogue and decision-making; and viewing all participants, parents, carers, and children as capable because they have their own experience, ideas, interpretations, and viewpoints (Moss, 2006).

## Active learning and meaning making

*Early childhood is a time of tremendous opportunity for active exploration and for interpreting this experience* (NCCA, 2004, p. 32). Active learning mediated through first hand experiences engages the baby, toddler and young child in following their personal interests and goals, individually, in pairs, in groups, in families, and community contexts in making sense of their world.

## Child learning as an individual

Piaget (cited in Wood, 1998) believed that all children pass through a series of developmental stages before they construct the ability to perceive, reason and understand in mature rational terms. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) claimed that the essential nature of human beings was their power to construct knowledge through adaptation to the environment. Thus, through assimilation and accommodation the child is in a continual process of cognitive self-correction. The goal of this activity is a better sense of equilibrium. Equilibration is fundamental to learning (Krogh and Slentz, 2001). Piaget's key contribution to child development is his teaching that learning is a continual process of meaning making. It is not a linear input/output process as favoured by behavioural theorists (Pavlov, Skinner). Information is not simply absorbed into a memory bank but must be *worked on by the child* in order for it to make sense in terms of the learner's existing frame of reference. For example, *deliver us from evil* becomes *deliver us from eagles* which makes sense to the listener (Robson and Smedley, 1996). This example highlights the negative impact of learning experiences which are abstract and removed from the child's everyday experience (Donaldson, 1993). Children's *thinking is embedded in a context which has some meaning to them whereas much school activity ... is 'disembedded'* (Moyles, 2001, p. 14). Activities such as 'filling in the blanks', worksheets and 'colouring in' are often removed from meaning and purpose for the child and *therefore make the process of learning more difficult* (Moyles, 2001, p. 14).

In contrast, first hand learning experiences fuel children's imagination and unquenchable thirst for understanding. This type of learning occurs in everyday contexts when children engage in activities which matter to them (Rich and Drummond, 2006). In designing an *involvement scale* for assessing children's

learning and development, Laevers (1997) identified signs of individual active engagement such as concentration, energy, complexity and creativity, facial expression and composure, persistence, precision, reaction time, verbal expression, and satisfaction. Children need to be involved in their learning and it has to be real and meaningful to them.

### **Child learning with others**

Dewey (1959, p. 27) also viewed learning as *a continuing reconstruction of experience*. Thus the optimal education should be both active and constructive. This kind of education has a social direction through *a joint activity* within which people consciously refer to each other's use of materials, tools, ideas, capacities, and applications (Dewey, 1966, p. 39). Dewey placed greater emphasis on interaction, than did Piaget. His focus was on designing a curriculum to reflect the circumstances children faced as members of a community living in the modern world. Fostering democracy, independence and real experiences in the classroom were major goals for Dewey. True collaborative exploration takes place where all participants influence the direction, timing, and outcome of the investigation. In such a social setting, according to Rinaldi (1992, p. 5), *doubt and amazement are welcome factors in a deductive method similar to the one used by a detective ... where the probable and the possible are assigned a place*.

Vygotsky also stressed children's active role in human development (1978). Unlike Piaget, he believed that children's development arises from the child's attempts to deal with everyday problems. Furthermore, in dealing with these problems, the child *always* develops strategies collectively—that is, in interaction with others. According to Vygotsky (1978, p. 57), *every function in the child's development appears twice: first on the social level and later on the individual level*. A significant proportion of children's everyday activities take place in what Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) calls the *zone of proximal development*. Modern day theorists (Rogoff, Bruner, Bronfenbrenner, Egan, Lave and Wenger) further developed Vygotsky's views. Wood *et al*, (1976) stressed the importance of the role of the adult and capable peers and identified that the key challenge for adults then becomes one of defining the limits of the zone, matching or tuning the adult support, or scaffolding the learning to a point beyond the child's current capabilities. Bronfenbrenner's work concurs, although he placed an even greater emphasis on the relationship between adult and child:

*Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment and when the balance of power gradually shifts in favour of the developing person* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 60).

### **Brain research**

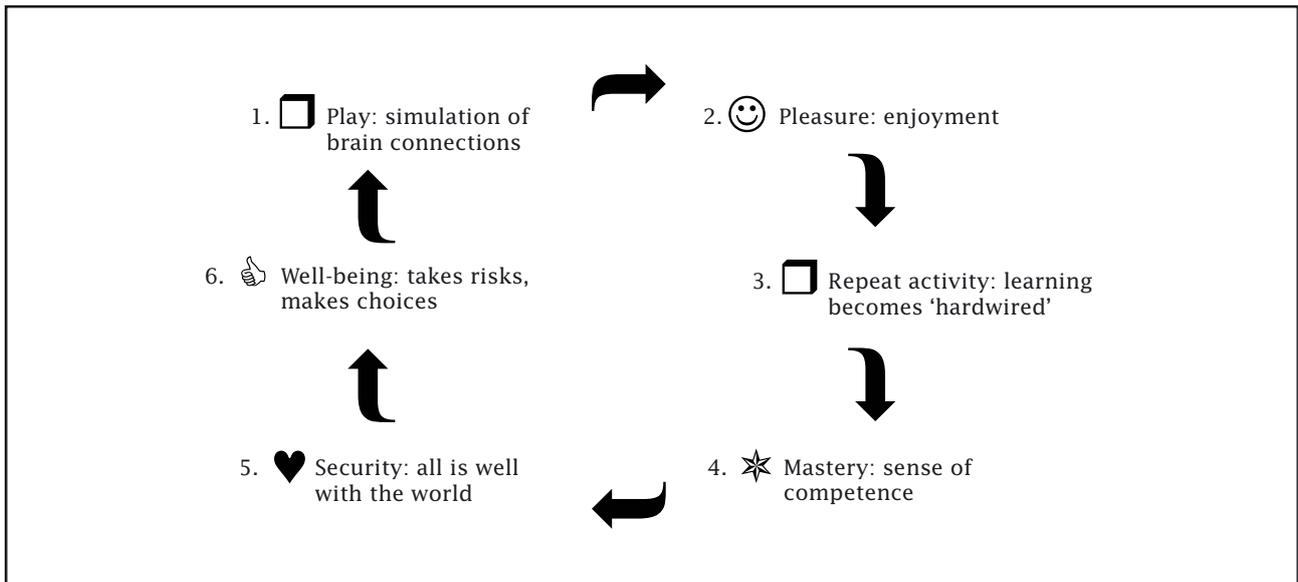
Research on brain development (although in its infancy) has suggested that direct action - physical and intellectual engagement with experiences - in addition to problem-solving and repetition, ensures that the synapses or neural pathways become stronger (Bruce, 2004). According to French and Murphy (2005), this is particularly true of children aged from birth to three years as early experience determines how the neural circuits in the brain are connected (Bertenthal and Campos, 1987). Children who are played with, spoken to, and allowed to explore stimulating surroundings are more likely to develop improved neural connections which aid later learning (Karr-Morse and Wiley, 1997). The stimulation babies, toddlers and young children receive determines which synapses form in the brain, that is, which pathways become hardwired. Through repetition these brain connections become permanent. Conversely, a connection that is not used at all or often enough is unlikely to survive. Children who learn actively have positive dispositions to learning. These children are interested in what they are doing, experience enjoyment and, with repetition, experience the probability of success. They develop competence and, as a result, confidence and are intrinsically motivated to learn (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995).

### **Cycle of active learning**

The role of active learning in supporting children's well-being and early learning and development is illustrated in Figure 1: the active learning cycle (Marshall 2005).



Figure 1: Active learning cycle



The adult has a responsibility to provide rich environments where children are able to *explore, touch, manipulate and experiment with different materials* (Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2005, p. 413) and where children can ask questions, make hypothesis and form new concepts. Children have to construct learning for themselves, with the focus of learning on the reasoning processes rather than on the end products. This requires time for children to engage in their explorations.

### Summary

Using key findings from theorists such as Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky, Donaldson, and Bronfenbrenner, and research on brain development, this section has explored the importance of activity and first hand experiences in supporting children's early learning and development. It has highlighted the adult's role in providing for and enriching this activity. These theorists have placed action and self-directed problem-solving at the heart of children's early learning and development. The consensus has moved firmly towards learning and developing in collaboration with others, and democracy between adult and child and more recently, child and child. This warrants an exploration of the crucial nature of relationships in early childhood.

### Relationships

*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 ... their emotional well-being is directly related to the quality of early attachments* (NCCA, 2004, p. 23). Mirroring Bronfenbrenner's systems model (1979; 1989), this section examines the role of different relationships in supporting the child's learning and development.

### The individual child

All babies are born with universal aspects to their development such as automatic reflexes or muscles that always develop from the head down. There are also fundamental variations. All babies cry, but some cry more than others. These differences can be ascribed to the individual temperament of the child. Temperament has been defined as *the inbuilt predispositions that form the foundations of personality* (Bee and Boyd, 2004, p. 79). Thomas and Chess (1977) identified that from birth, babies have been found to be different from each other in nine ways: activity level, adaptability, approach/withdrawal to novelty, attention span, distractibility, intensity of reaction, mood, regularity, and sensitivity threshold. These traits are shaped, strengthened or counteracted by the child's relationships and experiences. Children with more challenging temperaments may find it more

difficult to deal with life's stresses. Supportive, responsive adults in a low stress, accepting environment reduce this potential difficulty (Fish, Stifter and Belsky, 1991). In these environments, relationships enhance and enrich learning and development supporting many children to move through childhood with relative ease.

### **The building blocks of human relationships**

When children from birth are treated with warmth, respect and interest from responsive adults they are confident to learn and develop through sensory-motor exploration. Hohmann and Weikart (1995) building on the work of Erikson, identified five building blocks of human relationships. Thus, *trust* is a confident belief in oneself and in others that allows a young child to explore the unknown knowing that the people on whom s/he depends will provide needed support and encouragement. *Autonomy* is the capacity for independence, identity, exploration and thinking that prompts a child to make such statements as; *I wonder what is around the corner* and *let me do it*. *Initiative* is the capacity for children to begin and then follow through on a task - to take stock of a situation, make a decision and act on what they have come to understand. *Empathy* is the capacity that allows children to understand others' feelings by relating them to feelings that they themselves have had. Empathy helps children form relationships and develop a sense of belonging. *Self-confidence* is the capacity to believe in one's own ability to accomplish tasks, communicate and contribute positively to society.

These five capacities provide the foundation for much of the socialisation that occurs as children develop and blossom in an environment that supports the growth of positive social relationships. These capacities are fundamentally linked to the *Framework for Early Learning's* themes of Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking. Socio-cultural theory emphasises how intellectual capacity is intimately connected to social activity. Trevarthen (1998, p. 98) argues that the motivation, medium and outcome of learning is *intersubjectivity* which is a continual process of meaning making; the construction and reconstruction of joint purposes between a child as innate companion and co-participant. Relationships are therefore vital for a sense of identity and of separateness. Trevarthen (2001) describes human reciprocal relationships as *developing companionships*.

### **The child and family**

The crucial role of the family as *the natural and primary educator of the child* (Article 42.1 of the Constitution [1937]) with rights and duties to active participation in the child's education, is reflected in legislation and policy in Ireland. This role necessitates the development of strong working relationships between parents/family and practitioners/childminders based on a shared sense of purpose and mutual respect in order to create environments for children to support their optimal learning and development. The evidence strongly suggests that participation of parents in their child's care and education improves children's cognitive and social development and motivation and leads to higher adult expectations and increased parental confidence and aspirations (Schweinhart, Montie, Xiang, Barnett, Belfield and Nores, 2004; Taggart, 2007). The National Early Years Network's (1997) research in the US revealed that greater involvement by parents in their children's care and education leads to:

- more sharing of information between parents and practitioners/childminders
- parents spending more time in the setting
- parents improving their knowledge of parenting and child development generally
- family values and beliefs being understood and taken account of by the practitioner/childminder
- a more emotionally secure environment for the child
- parents being viewed as valuable resources bringing added value to the setting
- parents feeling more confident about engaging in dialogue regarding their children's later education.

Guided by the collective purpose of supporting the child, parents and practitioners/childminders bring different but important and complementary skills to caring for and educating children. Supportive and trusting relationships between parents and practitioners/childminders are therefore critical in supporting children's learning and development.

## The child and practitioner/childminder relationships

Adults' development of supportive relationships with babies, toddlers and young children is especially significant for children's emotional and social development. The importance of babies' attachment to their parents (mothers and fathers) has long been acknowledged (Bowlby, 1988). The part of the brain that deals with memories and coincides with the child's growing awareness of and attachment to caregivers, develops between the age of six and eight months. The experience young babies have of forming relationships at this time influences all future relationships (Perry, 1995; Karr-Morse and Wiley, 1997). Attachments between children and adults are critical in assuring the baby he/she will be taken care of, building in him/her a basic trust in others and giving the baby the sense that s/he is worth caring for. As articulated by Goldschmied and Jackson (1994, p. 37)

*The young children with whom we work, and who do not yet have language to express what they are experiencing, need to have these special relationships too, and deeply need to have them in a very immediate and concrete way. ... We can never remind ourselves too often that a child, particularly a very young and almost totally dependent one, is the only person in the nursery who cannot understand why he is there. He can only explain it as abandonment, and unless he is helped in a positive and affectionate way, this will mean levels of anxiety greater than he can tolerate.*

In general, babies depend on adults to meet their needs, and cope with little discomfort or distress. Toddlers rapidly acquire physical, social, reasoning, and language skills, but these skills still need a lot of practice. Through the development of positive relationships and problem-solving skills, young children begin to understand how to respect the needs/rights of others while meeting their own needs/rights (Gartrell and King, 2004). They also begin to see that there is not always a *right* side to the argument, that the feelings of others are important and that it is possible to solve conflicts in such a way that both parties can be satisfied. Corsaro (1997) noted that developmental psychologists have long stressed the importance of conflict and challenges for creating new cognitive structures and skills. When adults facilitate problem-solving children learn to collaborate, discuss details of problems (number; space; time) and discover there are many possible solutions to problems (Evans, 2002).

## Collaborative and shared learning

The adult role and collaborative teamwork are fundamental to developing positive relationships with children and their families (Bruner, 1996). Hohmann and Weikart (1995, p. 43) declare *a supportive interpersonal climate* is essential for learning. Both Dewey (1966) and Vygotsky (1978) proposed that learning is a reciprocal and collaborative process between adult and child. This involves active listening and reflection, in order to create a *pedagogy of listening* (Rinaldi, 2005) and a *pedagogy of relationships* (Malaguzzi, 1993b). This approach sees the adult as a teacher-researcher, a resource and guide to children; a catalyst to provoke, co-construct, and stimulate children's thinking and their collaboration with peers (Dewey, 1966). Vygotsky's concept of the *zone of proximal development*, Rogoff's (1990) model of *guided participation* and Trevarthen's (1998) *intersubjectivity* have helped adults to realise that children learn as social beings in daily interactions, with the support of others. The *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b) is premised on the principle that collaborative learning provides many advantages such as *children are stimulated by hearing the ideas and opinions of others, and by having the opportunity to react to them. Collaborative work exposes children to the individual perceptions that others may have of a problem or a situation* (Introduction, 1999b, p. 17). The *Primary School Curriculum* also emphasises the importance of the teacher using information he/she gathers about the child, to ensure that the learning opportunities and activities are effective in advancing the child's learning. Attention to the emotional state of babies and *a capacity to slow down and tune into young children's ways of experiencing the world* demands key worker systems especially for babies (Anning and Edwards, 1999, p. 64). This new understanding requires adults to take a more active participatory role as opposed to a didactic role in supporting children's learning.

## The child and community

Socio-cultural theory has been influential in guiding the early childhood profession towards a more community-spirited approach to children's learning and development (Cowie and Carr, 2004). Socio-cultural theory supports a view of learning as work in progress. Rogoff (2003, p. 60) suggests that in socio-cultural research children are observed within a dynamic and evolving cultural context. ... *we see a glimpse of a moving picture involving the history of the activities and the transformations towards the future in which people and their communities engage.* Lenses continually move back and forth from the intra-personal/personal to the interpersonal to the cultural/institutional (Rogoff, 2003). Lave and Wenger (1992) were also interested in the contexts in which learning takes place; speaking of *situated learning* and *communities of practice* as not just about content but about the entire social situation in which the learning takes place. This occurs in a participatory framework, not in an individual mind and is *mediated by differences of perspective amongst co-participants* (Lave and Wenger, 1992, p. 15). New learners join *communities of practice* as apprentice learners (for example, weaving baskets) and engage in *legitimate, peripheral participation*. They become full members when they have a comprehensive understanding of the processes in which they are involved and can perform the task without thinking.

## The child and society

Bourdieu (1977) offers the concept of the *habitus* to portray how members of society, through their continual and routine involvement in their social worlds, acquire a set of predispositions (habits) to behave and to perceive in a certain way. This set of predispositions is infused in early socialisation and plays itself out through the tendency of the child and all society members to maintain their sense of self and place in the world (Bourdieu, 1993). The 'mind' emerges through joint mediated activity and co-construction of learning and this activity is played out in society (Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 1990). Douglas (2004, p. 234) proposed that *every human being is part of a much larger, integrated system with a multitude of feedback loops.* Vygotsky's focus was on the nature, evolution and transmission of culture, which is learned by the child mainly through language and is considered in the next section. Drawing on his work, contemporary theory suggests that children's experiences of society can be the focus of the curriculum (Egan, 1997).

## Summary

This section reflected on the importance of relationships in children's learning and development and focused on the individual child; and the child in the context of the family, carers, community, and society. Each is a stakeholder in the child's learning and development. Learning and development is shaped by the home environment, family values and beliefs, family income, physical and psychological well-being of the family, the neighbourhood, and relevant public and social policies relating to families with young children. Bronfenbrenner (1989, p. 190) explained how *young children's learning does not take place in a vacuum.* *We must explore the ecological niche in which the child is living.* As socio-cultural theory proposes, children's evolving membership in their culture, begins in the family and spirals outward as children engage with their peers and go on to create a further series of cultures which in itself is influenced by the institutional structures (faiths/non faiths, sports, leisure activities) of the adult culture (Corsaro, 1997). In this way, children's learning and development is not confined to a single environment/setting, but is continually influenced by a dynamic interplay between all those environments inhabited by the child. This includes the linguistic environment.

## Communication and language

*Most children are naturally disposed to communicate. This enables them to establish and maintain social relationships with others, to express and share their thoughts and feelings, to represent and to understand the world around them* (NCCA, 2004, p. 29). As the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b) notes, *language has a vital role to play in children's development. Much learning takes place through the interaction of language and experience* (Introduction, Department of Education and Science, 1999b, p. 15). This section explores the importance of supporting children's language and communication

as part of their learning and development in early childhood. Significantly, Egan (1997, p. 67), re-conceives education as our learning to use particular intellectual tools such as language and literacy, which shape how we make sense of the world as ours is a *peculiar languaged understanding of the world* (author's emphasis).

### Language as a cultural tool

Children's development of both receptive and expressive language impacts on other domains of development (MacWhinney and Bornstein, 2003) particularly intellectual functioning and later literacy. According to Wood (1998), Vygotsky emphasised activity in learning but placed language and communication (and hence instruction) at the heart of personal and intellectual development. A key principle in Vygotsky's view was the individual's internalisation or appropriation of culture. Especially important to this process is language, which both encodes culture and is a tool for participating in culture. Vygotsky argued that language and other sign systems (for example, writing, film, and so on), like tool systems (for example, material objects like machines) are created by societies over the course of history and change with cultural development. Thus, argued Vygotsky, children, through their acquisition and use of language, come to reproduce a culture that contains the knowledge of generations.

Bruner (1990), like Piaget, emphasised the importance of biological and evolutionary constraints on human development. However, in keeping with Vygotsky he also stressed the way culture forms and transforms the child's development. Social interaction, language and instruction are central in forming the mind. He used the language of information processing in formulating his ideas grounded in a theory of culture and growth. Through language, the child reflects on his or her actions, integrates new experiences into an existing knowledge base, and seeks the co-operation of others in his/her activities (Hohmann, Banet and Weikart, 1979).

### Learning and developing using communication and language

In order to provide appropriate scaffolding for the child in learning and developing, a shared context of meaning and experience must be established. This is especially important in the first years of life, and is particularly relevant to children who do not speak Gaeilge or English as their first language or who have a specific language delay. In the early years the child's ability to communicate is not fully developed and the adult often needs to interpret or expand on the child's utterances or gestures. Through shared experiences, the child gradually makes sense of the world and of adult meaning. *The adult provides the bridge between the familiar and known to the unfamiliar and yet to be known, and responsibility is gradually transferred to the child* (Smith, 1999, p. 96). This process requires a close and nurturing relationship between adult and child.

Egan (1997) offers a summary of the human formation of language and the kind of understanding of the world and experience that stimulation and development of language capacities entail. Some level of language development occurs naturally by children being brought up in a language-using environment, but fuller development of language and its associated intellectual capacities requires deliberate teaching. Egan (1997, p. 68) has suggested that the *most important, dramatic, and vivid stories of our world and of human experience can provide an appropriate curriculum for the earliest years*. The issue of language development is critically linked to important educational questions of teaching (how much adult direction versus child initiation) and the consequences of literacy for participation in society (Wood, 1998). As advocated by the *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b), Wood (1998) suggests that, oracy (verbal expression by children) should be an important part of the curriculum.

### Summary

This section has looked at how different theorists consider children's understanding and construction of language. Research paints a positive picture in relation to young children's language acquisition as a foundation for learning and development. Children do not think in isolation; thinking is an everyday social activity and is culturally determined (Rogoff, 1990). Experiences with others play a formative role in the development of communication skills and a rich physical environment provides numerous language opportunities.

## The environment

*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* (NCCA, 2004, p. 54). McMillan (cited in Smith *et al*, 2005) believed in the importance of first hand experiences and active learning. Convinced of the value of play she ensured there were ample materials available to stimulate children's imaginations. This section provides a general overview of supportive physical environments.

### Characteristics of a supportive environment

The physical environment, both indoors and outdoors, encourages positive growth and development for children through opportunities to explore and learn (Finch, 1996). Safe, clean, spacious, bright, welcoming, warm, and accessible environments for children and adults, including those with additional needs, should afford opportunities to rest and play. Babies, toddlers and young children need fresh air and outdoor play space is essential if children are to have a balanced, healthy day. Learning is constrained and may be damaged if young children are required to sit still indoors, where adults do most of the talking and require children to follow their lead (Bruce, 2004). The environment should offer children opportunities to: actively explore, make decisions and follow through with their ideas; engage in co-operative, symbolic, dramatic or pretend play; move, dance and increase control over their bodies (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995).

Socio-cultural theory is concerned with children's learning in context. Children respond to the reality they see around them and what they learn reflects that reality (Penn, 2005). Environments can reflect the lives and activities of the children/families in the service to establish positive identities. In addition, environments can have resources to counteract stereotypical and discriminatory attitudes (French, 2003).

The same principles apply whether organising indoor or outdoor areas. In fact many of the activities babies, toddlers and young children enjoy indoors can be achieved outdoors and with greater freedom. If in group care, careful consideration of the organising of rooms for different age groups is necessary. Babies and toddlers need a room or home base where they can relate for part of the day with a small group of children and adults, where they can feel secure and build relationships. Older children need more space (French, 2003).

### Creating the supportive environment

Montessori (cited in Smith *et al*, 2005) advocated that the learning environment should be carefully planned to meet children's needs by providing them with the optimum opportunities to work independently, to make choices, decisions and solve problems, to engage in real experiences, and to experience success. The High/Scope Educational Research Foundation (2001) suggested the space should be inviting for children and organised into well-defined areas of interest to encourage distinctive types of play. Hohmann and Weikart (1995, p. 113) noted that *the interest areas are arranged to promote visibility and easy movement between areas and are flexible to accommodate ... children's changing interests*. Steiner promoted a variety of easily accessible, open-ended, natural, found, real life materials which can be used in creative and purposeful ways and reflect children's family lives (Curtis and O'Hagan, 2004). Materials are stored so that children can find, use and return materials they need. The most effective learning comes from simple but versatile materials and environments which extend the child's imagination and can be adapted by children to suit their learning needs and level of understanding. Dowling (2000, p. 10) referred to this as an *informational environment which supports children's ability to make and learn from mistakes, discover the best way of doing things and learn how to make decisions*. The power of the environment is portrayed through Malaguzzi's (1996, p. 40) words:

*... we consider the (physical) environment to be an essential constituent element of any theoretical or political research in education ... we place enormous value on the role of the environment as a motivating and animating force in creating spaces for relations, options, and emotional and cognitive situations that produce a sense of well-being and security.*

Gardner (1998, p. xvi) described the environment of Reggio Emilia's infant-toddler centres and preschools as involving *young children in long term engrossing projects, which are carried out in a beautifully, healthy, love-filled setting*. All centres have a piazza: the central meeting place where children from all around the school share their play and conversations together. Abbot and Nutbrown (2001, p. 2) described how a *tetrahedron (a triangular pyramid) with the mirrored interior is often to be found there ... Mirrors proliferate in all the centres in keeping with the central philosophy of seeing oneself and of constructing one's own identity*. Reggio Emilia's schooling for multiple intelligences approach calls for the integration of the graphic arts as tools for cognitive, linguistic, and social development. Attention to light, colour and display supports aesthetic learning and development and a sense of self as children see themselves and their work represented in their physical environment. The environment verifies Malaguzzi's emphasis on the child's hundred ways of thinking, of doing, of playing, of speaking, and the need to recognise diversity, not quell it.

## Summary

This section has highlighted the influence of the physical environment (both indoor and outdoor) on children's learning and development. Such influence is evidenced through the attention placed on the environment by numerous contributors to the field of early childhood care and education. This physical environment is especially critical for stimulating children's communication and play.

## Play

The NCCA's consultative document (2004) identified play as one of the key contexts for children's early learning and development. Play and its role in learning and development have focussed the attention of theorists from diverse perspectives and for a considerable period of time. A consistent feature of contemporary early childhood curriculum models such as those from New Zealand, Australia, the United States (US), and Reggio Emilia, is that learning through play is *channelled through complex reciprocal and responsive relationships and is situated in activities that are socially constructed and mediated* (Wood, 2004, p. 20). These models (stemming from socio-cultural theory) share Froebel's view that play is too important to be left to chance (Curtis and O'Hagan, 2003). Like Froebel, Montessori saw the value of self-initiated activity under adult guidance. However, she placed importance on learning about real life and therefore on constructive play materials which supported sensory discrimination. Informed by contemporary views, this section illustrates the importance of play in supporting children's early learning and development.

## Supporting and enabling learning and development

Wood (2004, p. 21) advocated that through play *children demonstrate improved verbal communication, high levels of social and interaction skills, creative use of play materials, imaginative and divergent thinking skills and problem-solving capacities*. Curtis and O'Hagan (2003) stressed that if play is to be seen as a process that will promote learning and development, it must be of high quality. This quality is nurtured by adults providing a rich environment and guiding children so they can develop their confidence as players and learners. As outlined by Anning *et al*, (2004, p. 17) the *maxim that children learn through play constitutes a pedagogical given in early years settings that has been influenced by developmental, play-based curriculum philosophies*. From this perspective, they reported, the adult facilitates children's development and manages the learning environment, and less frequently acts as educator.

## Play as a pedagogy

Moyles, Adams and Musgrave (2002) identified that although adults endorsed the educational benefits of play, they were unsure of their role in play and how to assess the outcomes of play. Professional knowledge and expertise is critical in planning and engaging in playing, learning and teaching. Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, and Bell (2002) in a study of effective pedagogy distinguished between pedagogical framing (planning for play, providing resources and a routine) on behalf of adults and pedagogical interactions (specific behaviours in face to face encounters), and indicated that both are required. They also concluded that the most effective settings had a balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities.

Wood (2004) suggested that a conceptual underpinning of socio-cultural and activities' theories could contribute to a firmer pedagogy of play. Play becomes understood in terms of the relationships between co-players, their actions, interactions, and the meanings they co-construct and the context in which the play occurs. Socio-cultural theories, therefore, serve to bridge the cognitive, individualistic accounts of learning as put forward by Piaget and the social, dynamic accounts of learning as proposed by Vygotsky.

### Summary

This section highlighted the role of play in children's early learning and development. As Hayes (2003, p. 79) proposes, play is *a pedagogical tool for the teacher as well as a pathway for learning for the child*. What is clear is that young children learn through play in an integrated way. Using all modalities - the senses, physical activity, emotions, and representations, children indulge in and enjoy play. In essence, play is a natural vehicle for holistic learning and development.

### The whole child in context

Young children learn from the range of experiences they have in their everyday lives. They don't naturally compartmentalise this learning. Children's holistic approach involves them intricately interweaving domains of social, emotional, personal, physical (sensory and motor), cognitive, linguistic, creative, aesthetic, moral, and spiritual development, and the whole system of learning processes all of which *influence each other in highly complex and sophisticated ways* (NCCA, 2004, p. 21).

Bruce, (2004, p. XV) reported how the basic processes of movement, play, communication, self-esteem, and understanding of self and others, *as well as the symbolic layerings in development (leading to dances, reading, writing, mathematical and musical notations, drawing and model making)* support children's learning and development. Erikson (1950) theorised that children from birth to approximately five years negotiate three stages of social and emotional development: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, and initiative versus guilt (see also Appendix 1). When children's experiences with adults lead to the development of trust, autonomy and initiative, children develop lasting feelings of hope, acceptance, will power and purpose. In a sense, this discussion of holistic learning and the child's development synthesises what has been discussed in this paper to date.

### Criticisms of developmentally appropriate practice

Current theories of children's learning and development embrace a view of the whole child developing in context (New, 1999). This image foregrounds the child's competencies as a learner. Developmental psychology and the range of domains it offers (physical, cognitive, linguistic, and so on) have made significant contributions to our knowledge of *how* children develop. Using this information, we can identify the kinds of experiences required to support that development for children and to highlight specific disorders. It also reminds us that children perceive and organise their worlds in ways that are qualitatively different from adults. The main criticism of child development, in so far as it exists as an underpinning discipline for working with children, is that it is too narrow and confining (Woodhead, 1996; Trevarthen, 1998; Anning, *et al*, 2004; Penn, 2005; Cannella, 2005; Yelland and Kilderry, 2005). Katz and Chard (1994) signal that development has two dimensions: normative and dynamic. Researchers have asserted that normative development (where development follows a prescribed pattern) has been over emphasised in early educational literature at the cost of the dynamic nature of development (Hayes, 2004). The dynamic dimension acknowledges that *human beings change over time and with experience and it allows for delayed impact and the long-term cumulative effect of repeated or frequent experiences* (Hayes, 2004, p. 141).

The term *developmentally appropriate practice* refers to practice for education that embraces the normative developmental stage of children. This term has been criticised in the past (Woodhead, 1996) because of its base within universal laws of development, emerging from a minority world ideology and without definition may not be appropriate depending on the cultural context. In addition when the normative and dynamic dimensions of development are considered, Katz and Chard (1994, p. 19) suggest *that just because children can do something when they are young does not mean that they should do it*.

Revised guidelines produced in the US (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997) while acknowledged as giving sensible advice on *developmentally appropriate practice* in early childhood programmes, have been criticised for being value-laden, stressing *individuality, self-assertiveness, personal choice and the availability of possessions* (Penn, 2005, p. 181). This market driven approach, heightens the role of the adult but does not acknowledge the importance of child-child interactions. Instead Woodhead (1996, p. 59) has offered the term *practice appropriate to the context of early development*. Such an approach merits a holistic and integrated approach to curriculum.

### **Holistic development in curricula**

That children learn and develop holistically is acknowledged by many educationalists (Froebel, Steiner, Malaguzzi, Montessori, Weikart). Steiner in particular exemplified the 'whole child' approach. Like Piaget he developed stages for human development which had cognitive implications for teaching and learning. However, this is only one part of the Steiner focus; through his philosophy of anthroposophy, the *journey for the soul and spirit was equally if not more important* (Krogh and Slentz, 2001, p. 89). Steiner placed great emphasis on cultivating a sense of aesthetics, empathising with fellow human beings, thinking and developing observation skills (a view shared with Montessori) and promoted children's engagement in rhythm, language, music, and movement. This emphasis on physical development is an important message (Penn, 2005). Blenkin and Kelly (1994) advocated experiential learning and sensory-based activities as opposed to pre-determined school knowledge to be taught to young children.

Some curricula emphasise the use of domains of development and correspondingly present the learning for young children as *the physical self, the psycho-social self and the thinking self* (South Australian Curriculum and Standards and Accountability Framework, 2001). The *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b) presents learning through curriculum areas such as language, mathematics, social, environmental and scientific education and so on, and recommends the use of topics and areas of interest particularly in infant classes to present learning in an integrated way. *For the young child, the distinctions between subjects are not relevant: what is more important is that he or she experiences a coherent learning process that accommodates a variety of elements* (Department of Education and Science, Introduction, 1999b, p. 16). A thematic approach to understanding and supporting children's learning and development as presented in the *Framework for Early Learning* developed by the NCCA, bridges the gap between the developmental domains and a more holistic and integrated approach.

### **Holistic development in the Framework for Early Learning**

The *Framework for Early Learning's* thematic approach to presenting children's learning and development *conveys successfully the integrated and holistic development of the young learner, and the totality of his/her learning needs* (NCCA, 2004, p. 22). Bruce (1997) suggested that subjects such as mathematics and art cannot be separated; young children learn in an integrated way and not in neat, tidy compartments. Katz and Chard (1989) proposed project work (an in-depth study of a particular topic that one or more children undertake) as an ideal way of supporting learning in an integrated way. Projects can be 'going to the hospital' or 'building a house'. The thematic approach such as the NCCA's (2004) proposed themes of Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, and Exploring and Thinking bridges the developmental domains and moves towards a more integrated way of thinking about how children learn and develop. This new way of thinking continues to support children to grow and develop socially, linguistically, physically, cognitively, creatively, and so on but in a way which is more natural, more meaningful and enjoyable for children. Children's interests and needs are at the centre of what and how they learn. An effective curriculum acknowledges that children learn and develop holistically.

### **Summary**

This section highlighted children's predisposition to learn in an integrated and connected way. Recognising the significant benefit for children's early learning and development, this holistic approach has long been supported by many educationalists (see also Appendix 1). The thematic curriculum framework being developed by the NCCA will present opportunities for practitioners to review how children's early learning and development is organised and will support them to provide for more connected and coherent learning experiences for children across early childhood.

## Early childhood curriculum

*Curriculum addresses the totality of the child's learning and development* (NCCA, 2001, p. 10). This section considers curriculum as product and process, each deriving from a particular understanding of children as young learners. It also explores common principles from the pioneers of early education for optimal learning and development concluding with lessons from a recent study on effective pedagogic practice.

### Product and process models

The product view of curriculum proposes that a body of knowledge, complete with a set of clear goals and objectives, must be imparted to the child. Bloom's (1956) Taxonomy divided learning into the domains of cognitive; affective; and psychomotor education. Scientific accuracy, structure and precision are the main features of this model. Children's individual learning styles were ignored and didactic instruction encouraged. The product or end-state was emphasised to the cost of the process. In contrast, the process model looks to the nature of the child as opposed to the nature of the knowledge to be transmitted (Kelly, 1989). The contribution of each child and his/her inherent abilities is the starting point of the curriculum which is delivered to support the distinctive thought processes, understanding and developmental profile of the child.

### An appropriate curriculum

The curriculum in early childhood refers to the complete programme of activities offered to the children. It is, in effect, the totality of the policies and practices, the relationships between all involved in the setting, the experiences provided, the resources, the physical environment (indoor and outdoor), the teaching and learning styles, and the systems of assessment. An effective curriculum ensures that the child is at the centre of curriculum planning rather than the child having to fit in with service demands (Lally and Hurst, 1992). This paper suggests that in developing curriculum for birth to six-year-old children, learning is viewed in broad terms, integrating care and education and is concerned with all learning experiences planned and unplanned, formal and informal. Katz (1998) recommends that the curriculum be flexible, responding to the needs and interests of the children situated in their culture. Learning is viewed as a process and is life-long.

### Core principles of practice

Bruce (1997) developed, revisited and reframed core principles of practice over a ten- year period based on the philosophies of pioneers of early education (Froebel, Montessori and Steiner). In extending this work, consideration of the practice of Malaguzzi and Weikart, socio-cultural theory and the work of Ball (1992) was incorporated.

Bruce (1997) began by articulating that the best way to prepare children for their adult life was to give them what they needed as children. Socio-cultural theory (Prout and James, 1997) advocates that children are whole people with voice and agency in their own right, who have feelings, ideas and relationships with others, and who need to be physically, psychologically, morally, and spiritually healthy. Developmental psychology points to children's inherent desire for knowledge and understanding of things around them. In addition, children develop at different rates and in different ways, and there are times when children are especially able to learn particular things (Bruce, 1997; Curtis and O'Hagan, 2003).

Children need time and space to produce work of quality and depth (Ball, 1992). Work on a project should not be limited and can extend over days or weeks (depending on the nature of the project and the child's abilities, strengths and interests). Imagination, creativity and all kinds of symbolic behaviour (reading, writing, drawing, dancing, music, mathematics, role playing, and talking) develop and emerge when conditions are favourable (Bruce, 1997). According to Ball (1992) children learn most effectively through actions, rather than from instruction and when they are interested. Play and conversation are the main ways by which young children learn.

Children who are encouraged to think for themselves are more likely to act independently (Ball, 1992; Malaguzzi, 1993b; Hohman and Weikart, 1995). Bruce (1997) emphasised that children learn best when

they are given appropriate responsibility, allowed to make errors, decisions and choices, and respected as independent learners. She emphasised the importance of self-discipline (in her view this is the only kind of discipline worth having) and noted that reward systems do not work in the long-term. Malaguzzi (1993b) identified that documentation and displays of children's ideas and work enhance their learning, the adults' learning and the parents' involvement in their children's experiences in fundamental ways. What children can do (rather than what they cannot do) is the starting point of a child's education (Bruce, 1997; Wood, 1998). As exemplified by Ball (1992) children who feel confident in themselves and their own ability have a head start to learning. Finally, relationships with other people, both adults and children, are of central importance to a child's learning and development (Ball 1992; Bruce, 1997).

### **Effective pedagogy**

To conclude this section, considerations from Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) are offered for the curriculum. These are drawn from case studies of settings that had proved effective in promoting children's learning and development. This research found that effective pedagogy was characterised by:

- a careful mix of adult-initiated group work and freely chosen child-initiated activities
- the quality of shared, sustained dialogue and thinking between both adults and children and children and their peers
- adults' knowledge of child development and curriculum
- support for children to represent their understanding in a range of means
- skilled assessment of children's learning and consequent strategic planning for a wide range of curriculum experiences.

### **Summary**

In this section, curriculum was presented as encompassing the totality of young children's learning experiences. In exploring the features of that curriculum, common principles from the pioneers of early education were combined with more recent educational research. These principles underpin and support the development of a curriculum which will enable and empower each child as a learner both with and alongside peers and adults.

## Concluding comments

This research paper *Children's early learning and development* sets out the theory and research underpinning children's early learning and development behind the *Framework for Early Learning*. The paper essentially responds to the question - *how should we envision and understand the child as a young learner?* The paper is a stimulus for dialogue rather than a statement of fact and begins by outlining the context for early childhood care and education in Ireland by referring to our economic and social climate, the increasingly multicultural nature of 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; actively learning in reciprocal relations with adults and other children. This new construction of childhood is oriented towards the child's present rather than his/her future.

Early childhood care and education is no longer dominated by individualistic developmental explanations for learning and development but is enhanced by theories that foreground the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning. This paper uses common principles as lenses to highlight important messages which inform contemporary thinking about how children learn and develop. From this perspective, learning and development are inextricably intertwined and are enmeshed within the milieu of social relationships. The child develops not in isolation but in the context of family, neighbourhood, community, public policies, and society. The image of the child-developing-in-context provides for a more dynamic conception of learning and development and opens the lens through which we observe children. This socio-cultural understanding of learning and development underpins this research paper and highlights the message that children's early learning and development, therefore, is a matter for the whole of society.

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## Appendix 1: Influences on early learning and development

Key concepts	Implications for practice
<b>Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel (1782 - 1852)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Children have inborn knowledge and skills and are innately creative beings.</li> <li>■ The curriculum consists of a carefully sequenced set of manipulative materials known as Gifts complimented equally by a set of handwork projects known as Occupations (modelling and drawing).</li> <li>■ There is a focus on mathematical and language skills and on the adult-child relationship.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ To bring these innate skills to the fore adults must make children consciously aware and able to use all they know.</li> <li>■ For the first time play is used as a methodology in schools often in adult-directed activities designed to teach concepts and skills through the Gifts and Occupations and formal games, art, music, and outdoor experiences (gardening and care of pets).</li> <li>■ There is a focus on adult-child dialogue strategies of coaching, prompting, giving suggestions, asking questions, modelling, and deductive (reasoning) lessons with advanced thinkers.</li> </ul>
<b>John Dewey (1859 - 1952)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Children are innately social beings; the builders of a new social order – a democratic society.</li> <li>■ The curriculum, designed to meet real life challenges, integrated subject areas and required coordination of socio-emotional, psychomotor, and cognitive responses from children.</li> <li>■ Greater focus on learning/education than on development. Learning is a reciprocal and collaborative process between adult and child.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ This involved a shift from adult directed to co-operative learning between adult and child. Adult observes, documents, builds on children's interests, and plans a purposeful curriculum and makes sense of the world for children.</li> <li>■ Activities are provided to promote social problem solving processes such as joint adult-child or child-child efforts at making lunch or lengthy projects e.g. representations of a local park.</li> <li>■ Children are allowed to investigate and reflect on their experiences through social interactions in a well-planned social and physical environment.</li> </ul>
<b>Rudolph Steiner (1861 - 1925)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Children go through stages (Will, Heart and Head).</li> <li>■ The development of the whole child, particularly spiritual development is significant. Understanding the nature of children supports their individuality.</li> <li>■ Children who are offered a creative and balanced curriculum will develop into a creative and flexible people.</li> <li>■ The adult's role is to help children learn to do things to their best ability.</li> <li>■ The design of the environment concerns warm colours, soft materials and rounded corners and is without plastic toys. Outdoors, the equipment is minimal, but logs and trunks are plentiful to encourage children's use of own imagination.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Children are not given instructional materials and are not introduced to reading or numerical skills. Instead a routine of singing and opportunities for movement through circle games is provided and children are guided, sometimes with a story to play where full expression of their imagination is encouraged.</li> <li>■ Experiences of the arts and sciences are offered as well as processes of thinking, feeling and willing. Open-ended activities (paintings) are favoured rather than limited options (colouring in sheets). Children play individually and in groups.</li> <li>■ The adult greets each child individually each morning</li> <li>■ Wooden blocks and simple natural materials are provided. Sewing materials and a workbench with child-sized but working tools are available. The equipment is versatile; the storage containers can be used in a multitude of ways to stimulate children's imagination.</li> </ul>

Key concepts	Implications for practice
<b>Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Learning is a continuum between refinement of the senses and a broadening of intellectual/ emotional/ social functioning.</li> <li>■ Curriculum and apparatus are sequentially introduced to coincide with 'sensitive periods' of a child's development.</li> <li>■ Children have 'absorbent minds', sensitive to order and hunger for knowledge of their real world.</li> <li>■ The curriculum fosters learning goals around areas of interest and personal challenge.</li> <li>■ Sensorial exercises focus on sensorial discrimination.</li> <li>■ Social and individual responsibility, dignity and respect are encouraged.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ A prepared environment facilitates enjoyable challenging activities where children grasp complex ideas through multi-sensory, self-correcting materials.</li> <li>■ Appropriately trained adults present materials in a sequential manner at the level of the individual child; these are graded from simple to complex.</li> <li>■ Children are most sensitive and receptive to language acquisition, order, personal independence, and social/cultural skills.</li> <li>■ Practical Life exercises develop gross and fine motor skills, concentration and responsibility in independently chosen activities.</li> <li>■ The developed senses lay the foundations for reading and writing, maths, the sciences and so on.</li> <li>■ Language development occurs through discussion on cultural topics, animals, wild life, and the use of the phonetic method.</li> </ul>
<b>Lev Vygotsky (1896 - 1934)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Language and communication (and hence instruction) are at the heart of personal and intellectual development. Both cognitive and social development work together and build on each other, and learning leads development.</li> <li>■ He developed the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).</li> <li>■ There is emphasis on the importance of interaction with adults and peers in advancing children's knowledge.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Children learn as social beings, with the support of others, and there is a consequent requirement for adults to take a more active teaching role.</li> <li>■ The ZPD is the space between the most difficult things a child can do alone and what s/he can do with help. An adult or capable peer can act as a scaffold to the child.</li> <li>■ Adults observe children carefully to assess what is within each child's ZPD and plan curriculum experiences that support children's holistic development and emerging capabilities.</li> <li>■ Adults encourage conversations through questioning, humour and discussion.</li> </ul>
<b>Jean Piaget (1896 - 1980)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Through play children pass through a series of graduating intellectual developmental stages (sensorimotor, pre-operational) before they construct the ability to reason by giving meaning to place, people and things.</li> <li>■ Learning is neither intrinsic (coming from the child) nor extrinsic (imposed by the environment) but through the child's interactions with the environment.</li> <li>■ From birth, children engage in reciprocal acts of 'assimilation' and 'accommodation' in order to form, and extend the structures of their minds.</li> <li>■ Equilibration is fundamental to learning and refers to the child's continual process of cognitive self-correction, whose goal is a better sense of equilibrium.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The first stage is from Birth-18 months (sensorimotor) when babies learn through their senses and reflexes, and as they act upon objects and manipulate materials. Children need to be kept safe but interested and to be responded to reassuringly to ease separation anxiety. The second stage is from 18 months-six years (pre-operational) when toddlers and young children form ideas based on their perceptions, focus on one thing at a time, and over-generalise.</li> <li>■ Adults can only influence the course of intellectual development if the child is able to assimilate what is said and done. Assimilation is constrained by the child's stage of development which leads to the concept of 'learning readiness'.</li> <li>■ Children need time for uninterrupted free-play and to be provided with many real world, problem-solving experiences and open-ended activities.</li> </ul>

Key concepts	Implications for practice
<b>Erik Erikson (1902 - 1994)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Erikson focussed on the emotional and social development of children and subsequent mental health.</li> <li>■ The Eight Ages of Man theory covers the entire lifespan and suggests that tasks must be accomplished at each life stage and each stage successfully resolved before moving on. For children from birth to age six there are three stages and consequent strengths developed (Trust versus Mistrust, Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt, Initiative versus Guilt - Purpose).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ From birth to one year (Trust vs. Mistrust) babies establish basic trust in her/himself and the world. Attachments with adults are secured through being held and responded to instantly when distressed.</li> <li>■ From two to three years (Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt) toddlers establish a sense of independence without shame. They need choice and reassuring limit setting and an acceptance of their emotions by caring adults.</li> <li>■ From four to five years (Initiative vs. Guilt - Purpose) young children acquire a sense of purpose. They need opportunities to plan and carry out a task independently, a focus on strengths - not mistakes, reasonable expectations and a curriculum focused on real things and action.</li> </ul>
<b>Loris Malaguzzi (1910 - 1994)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Reggio Emilia is a small town in the region of Emilia Romagna (Northern Italy) and is home to infant and toddler and early years settings. The Reggio experience has been produced within a very particular political, economic and social context with deep reserves of social capital produced by trust, mutuality and cooperation.</li> <li>■ The curriculum in Reggio Emilia is not established in advance but emerges totally through the interests of children. The Reggio approach is not just about practice; it is underpinned by a philosophy which continues to grow and develop.</li> <li>■ Young children are engaged in long term engrossing projects, which are carried out in carefully planned, beautiful environments catering for the idea of schooling for multiple intelligences.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The topics for study are captured from the talk of children, through community or family events, as well as the known interests of children (puddles, shadows, dinosaurs); they are then pursued in depth through projects. The adult sees the child’s competence in a variety of forms of symbolic representation as a critical feature of early childhood education. Collaborative group work, both large and small, is considered valuable and necessary to advance cognitive development. A well stocked atelier (art studio) is in place with the integration of the graphic arts as tools for cognitive, linguistic, and social development.</li> <li>■ In Reggio Emilia documentation of children’s words and representations is adopted which include photographs of children working, conversations they had, observations and interpretations by adults.</li> <li>■ Children have extended periods of time to discuss ideas, develop their cooperative projects, research ways of doing things, try things out, and revisit drawings and comments previously made.</li> </ul>
<b>David Weikart (1932 - 2003)</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The High/Scope approach was designed in response to the persistent failures of high school children from poor neighbourhoods in Ypsilanti, Michigan (USA).</li> <li>■ The curriculum emerges from children’s interests and the observations of practitioners with a balance of child-initiated and adult-initiated activities and is located within key experiences for the baby and toddler and young child and the school going child.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The ‘key experiences’ are a series of statements describing the holistic, social, cognitive, and physical development of children. Each statement highlights an active learning experience which supports the fundamental abilities that emerge during childhood. Given the emphasis on children-initiated activities, adults ensure that children have opportunities to engage in essential key experiences in small group times that they would otherwise not choose to do.</li> <li>■ Active learning involves the child having choice of a range of materials and activities. They are free to manipulate those materials, and encouraged to use their own language and have adult support.</li> </ul>

Key concepts	Implications for practice
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Children are seen as competent, active learners who plan, carry out, and reflect on their activities.</li> <li>■ The curriculum process for the young child includes a plan-do-review sequence within the daily routine (for the baby and toddler it is called choice time). In addition, adults guide children's learning through greeting time, transitions, meal times, small group time, and large group time. The children assist with cleaning and have daily outside time.</li> <li>■ The High/Scope environment is carefully planned and is divided into distinctive work areas.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ The plan-do-review sequence involves:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Planning: children are free to choose which activities to do. This requires expressing their intentions; this also means the activity is always appropriate to the context of early development.</li> <li>■ Doing: children carry out their plan (which often changes), generating experiences.</li> <li>■ Reviewing: children reflect on their experiences with their peers and adults.</li> </ul> </li> <li>■ The environment includes a book, a home, a construction, and an art area as the four base areas. Other areas are added depending on the children's interests e.g. computer, woodwork, gardening, office, shop. Materials are labelled and stored so that children can find, use and return materials they need. Children's work is carefully displayed.</li> </ul>
<b>Jerome Bruner (1915 - )</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Bruner views children as active problem-solvers who are ready to explore 'difficult' subjects and who are learning from birth.</li> <li>■ Information is obtained through personal discovery and is classified enactively, iconically or symbolically.</li> <li>■ Within the education system, a teacher would then engage students in active dialogue and guide them when necessary so that students would progressively build their own knowledge base, rather than be 'taught'. Learning is an active process in which new information would be classified and understood by the learner based on knowledge already gained. This notion underpins the idea of the spiral curriculum. Bruner suggested that people remember things because of their significance and meaning not because they want to preserve the facts themselves.</li> <li>■ Interest in the material to be learned is the best stimulus to learning, rather than such external goals as grades or later competitive advantage.</li> <li>■ Bruner believes that how one conceives education, is a function of how one conceives culture and its aims. Culture provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conception of ourselves and our powers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.</li> <li>■ In their very early years, young children rely extensively upon enactive modes to learn. As a child learns to roll over, sit up or walk, they are learning to do so through their own actions. In iconic representation, children learn to understand what pictures and diagrams are and how to do arithmetic using numbers and without counting objects. This normally becomes dominant during the next stage of childhood years. Later (usually around adolescence) the symbolic mode of learning becomes most dominant. An adult wanting to help children learn about dinosaurs could use all three modes. Students could be asked to construct models of dinosaurs (enactive); they might watch a film about, or involving, dinosaurs (iconic); or they could consult reference texts and discuss their findings (symbolic).</li> <li>■ How children construct knowledge involves three basic principles of instruction:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ 1. Instruction is concerned with the experiences and contexts that make the student willing and able to learn (predispositions to learning).</li> <li>→ 2. Instruction is structured so that it can be easily grasped by the student. Attention is paid to the most effective sequences in which to present material. A curriculum as it develops should spiral and revisit basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal structure that goes with them (spiral organisation).</li> <li>→ 3. Instruction should be designed to facilitate extrapolation and or fill in the gaps (going beyond the information given). Information can be simplified and new hypotheses generated increasing intellectual manipulation of material.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Children should be provided with study materials, activities, and tools that they are interested in and are matched to and capitalise on their developing cognitive capabilities. The adult translates information to be learned into a format appropriate to the learner's current state of understanding and arouses interest in what there is to be learned.</li> <li>■ Culture shapes the mind - mental activity is neither solo nor conducted unassisted. Awareness of children's (and adults') culture is critical to learning and needs to be incorporated in activities and tools.</li> </ul>
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**Contemporary theorists such as Rogoff, Egan, Dahlberg, Prout, James, Traverthen, Lave among others**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Socio-cultural theory views learning as a work in progress, in context, and as a social activity.</li> <li>■ Agency, voice, complex identities, and social justice are critical.</li> <li>■ There are different ways of being a child and different childhoods. Childhood is not universal. It is understood as a social construction; a product of cultures and as such will vary across time and place. It is only possible to understand the culture of a group by exploring their everyday practice and relationships in detail (deconstructing what they do and why).</li> <li>■ The adult-child relationship and child-child relationships are key learning contexts. Learning is a reciprocal process and emerges through joint mediated activities among participants.</li> <li>■ Language, communication, culture, and learning emphasise the central role of narrative and its manifestations in conversation, story-making and play. There is an emphasis on the meanings which govern how people live and behave. What people think, feel and their reported motivations are relevant to understanding their behaviour.</li> <li>■ The concept that learning and development are biologically determined is challenged.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Children's development and learning is continuous, takes place in close co-operation with other children and adults and in many different contexts (home, early years settings, neighbourhoods, community). Children learn through communication with others while engaging in goal-oriented activities.</li> <li>■ The child is seen as a competent learner, capable of making choices and decisions; from diverse backgrounds, and is deserving of respect.</li> <li>■ Adults need to embrace children's cultures. Children's relationships and cultures are worthy of study in their own right.</li> <li>■ Adults need a deep understanding of children's learning and development; create learning that is integrated, personally relevant and meaningful; adopt multiple teaching strategies for individual learning styles; observe and document; reflect and strive to form positive relationships.</li> <li>■ Early childhood settings are places of dialogue, participation and education in a process which involves the children, their parents, staff, community, and society. Play is a vehicle for social interaction and is fundamentally important for children. Children's minds can be uniquely engaged with stories, told orally and through texts; talking with children and discussing actions and events provides the words to build images.</li> <li>■ Learning and development occurs when children are regularly engaged in meaningful experiences over time with adults and other children. In order for children to produce new learning or ways of viewing the world, children's interest and attention are required; encouragement and feedback given; the key points of a task explained so children know what's needed; and a demonstration offered from adult or peer of how it might be done.</li> </ul>
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National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)



# Aistear

*Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige*  
*The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*



## **Children's early learning and development: A research paper**

**Executive Summary**

# **Children's early learning and development: A research paper**

## **Executive Summary**

By Geraldine French  
Independent Early Years Specialist

Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA.

# Children's early learning and development

## An executive summary

The paper *Children's early learning and development* sets out the theory and research underpinning children's early learning and development behind the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>1</sup>. The paper 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 by referring to our economic and social climate, the increasingly multicultural nature of 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 rather than his/her future. Building on this image of the child, key messages about how children learn and develop are condensed in this executive summary.

## Equality and diversity

- All children are individuals, unique in their abilities, from a rich diversity of backgrounds, beliefs and cultures. Children have the right to be treated with respect, positive regard and dignity.
- Biases develop very early in young children. Through participating in everyday activities and play, children absorb powerful messages from people, the environment and community regarding their identity, culture and social values.
- By exploring the attributes of their own and other cultures in everyday practice, children come to appreciate their common humanity as well as enjoying an optimal environment for cognitive, emotional and social growth.
- Children should be enabled to acknowledge, respect and affirm diversity in order to promote equality and to challenge unfair discrimination. Warm, democratic relationships support children's development in this regard.

## Active learning and meaning making

- Through active learning, the baby, toddler and young child follow their personal interests and goals through first hand experiences of the world around them, individually, in pairs, in groups, in families, and in the community.
- Learning is a continual process of meaning making; it is not a linear input/output process. Active learning, physical and intellectual engagement with people (ideas) and materials (experiences), self and group directed problem-solving and repetition are at the heart of learning and development.
- The adult has a responsibility to provide rich environments where children are able to explore, touch, manipulate, and experiment with a variety of real life and diverse materials and where children can ask questions, make hypothesis and develop their thinking.
- Children learn in collaboration with others yet have to construct learning for themselves. True collaborative exploration takes place where all participants influence the direction, timing, and outcome of the investigation.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

## Relationships

- The importance of the role of the adult and the establishment of positive relationships between the adult and child are critical in enhancing and enriching the child's learning and development.
- The child should experience trust, autonomy, initiative, empathy, and self-confidence as the foundation for socialisation. The formation of attachment is especially important for the young child's emotional and social development.
- The participation of parents in their children's learning improves children's motivation and promotes a sense of partnership in the learning process.
- Children's evolving membership in their culture begins in the family and spirals outward as children engage with their peers. The child learns and develops in context and as part of his/her community and society.

## Communication and language

- Social interaction, language, and scaffolding by adults are central in forming the child's mind. Children's development of both receptive and expressive language is integral to all development particularly intellectual functioning and later literacy.
- Some level of language development occurs naturally by children experiencing a language-rich environment; fuller development of children's language capacities requires targeted teaching and encouragement of children's verbal expression.
- Through language, the child becomes part of his/her culture, seeks the co-operation of others in his/her activities, integrates new experiences into an existing knowledge base and reflects on his/her actions.
- In order to provide appropriate scaffolding for the child in learning and developing a shared context of meaning and experience must be established. The adult often needs to interpret or expand on the child's utterances or gestures. Through shared experiences, the child gradually makes sense of the world and of adult meaning. This process requires a close and nurturing relationship between adult and child.

## The environment

- Children learn through their senses both indoors and outdoors, in a supportive environment.
- There is a requirement on adults to provide a range of challenging and interesting indoor and outdoor experiences for children.
- The environment should offer children opportunities to actively explore, to work independently and with others, to make decisions and follow through with their ideas, to solve problems, to engage in real activities, and to experience co-operative, symbolic, dramatic or pretend play.
- The most effective learning comes from simple but versatile materials which are accessible to children. The learning environment should extend children's imagination and be adaptable to suit their learning needs and level of understanding.

## Play

- Play is one of the key contexts for children's early learning and development.
- Through relationships in play, children develop and demonstrate improved verbal communication, high levels of social and interaction skills, creative use of play materials, imaginative and divergent thinking, and problem-solving capacities.

- The most effective play settings have a balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated activities.
- Adults need to plan for play and the specific interactions required to appropriately scaffold children's learning.

## **The whole child in context**

- Holistic learning and development involves all areas of development and embraces a view of the whole child developing in the context of family, home and community.
- Young children do not learn in discrete units; they make connections across their learning with these connections changing and developing with new experiences.
- A framework which uses themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication and exploring and thinking) to present children's early learning and development offers a way of moving from thinking about learning and development in discrete developmental domains to thinking about these in a more holistic and integrated way.
- The traditional domains such as cognitive, social, physical, creative, spiritual development, and so on permeate the themes mentioned above. Consequently, the thematic framework supports children's learning and development in a way which is more natural and enjoyable for young children.

## **Early childhood curriculum**

- The early childhood curriculum is concerned with the totality of the policies and practices established in the setting, the relationships between all participants, the experiences provided, the resources, the physical environment, the teaching and learning styles, and the systems of assessment.
- An appropriate curriculum for young children views learning as a process.
- The child's interests, strengths, culture, needs, and learning styles are placed at the centre of planning for his/her learning and development.
- Providing appropriate learning experiences for children requires practitioners to have knowledge of child development in order to support children's learning and development and to forward plan for a wide range of appropriate curriculum experiences.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, early childhood care and education is enhanced by theories that foreground the cultural and socially constructed nature of learning. From this perspective, learning and development are inextricably intertwined and are enmeshed within the milieu of social relationships. The child develops not in isolation but in the context of family, neighbourhood, community, society and public policies. Children's early learning and development, therefore, is a matter for the whole of society.



## Reference

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National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)

# Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige  
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

## Play as a context for Early Learning and Development

A research paper

# **Play as a context for Early Learning and Development**

**A research paper**

Margaret Kernan, Ph D

Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA.



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## Introduction

The image of the child presented in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (2004) is that of a capable and active learner. Supporting this image is the identification of play and relationships as the two primary contexts for learning. By viewing early learning through the 'relationships lens', the Framework emphasises the highly interactive and social nature of learning. The question arises regarding the specific understanding of, and role of play, within such a vision for learning in the early years.

This paper is part of a series of four research papers accompanying the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>1</sup>. The paper addresses the relationship between play, development and learning with the ultimate aim of elaborating on the place of play in the Framework. In this respect, 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' that has relevance for children in the diversity of early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings in Ireland, and across the broad age range of early childhood from birth to six years. Throughout the paper, the term 'pedagogy of play' is used to capture the content and approach to play in the context of ECCE settings and in particular in relation to children's well-being, learning and development. A pedagogy of play, thus, incorporates theory and everyday practice with children. This practice includes planning, relationships, the organisation of the physical environment and reflection. Emphasis is also placed on the ongoing learning of the pedagogue or early years practitioner, and on the child (Moss and Petrie, 2002). The paper acknowledges the distinct roles that parents and early years practitioners play in children's lives and the specialised nature of early years practitioners' work with children. Yet at times, the paper purposely blurs the distinction between pedagogical practices in ECCE settings and home contexts.

The paper is broadly divided into three sections. The purpose of Section 1 is to locate the discussion within the broad context of the place of play in early childhood from both children's and adults' perspectives. This part also addresses the various ways play has been framed within ECCE curricula in different contexts with particular attention on the role of the adult in play. Finally, attention is placed firmly on the place of play in Irish ECCE policy and practice in recent times.

Section 2 of the paper focuses on theoretical understandings of play. Key conceptual theories relating to children's play and learning which have had most influence in ECCE are tracked from their historical origins to contemporary understandings. Section 2 also looks at time and space in play as well as considering equal opportunities in play.

In the third and final section of the paper, an attempt is made to provide a conceptual link between theory and practice by exploring the notion of the playing-learning child. This is achieved by examining possibilities for effective learning and development in the everyday experiences of babies, toddlers and young children. The concluding comments identify key messages from the research, examples and arguments presented.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

## Section 1: Understandings of play in early childhood: children's and adults' perspectives

### Play in children's lives in early childhood: multi-disciplinary perspectives

Since the time of the classic Greek philosophers, play has been considered the characteristic mode of behaviour of the young child, an expression of the natural spirit of childhood and thus a key defining feature of childhood (Fromberg and Bergen, 2006; Kleine, 1993; Mayall, 2002). No one definition of play can encompass all the views, perceptions, experiences and expectations that are connected with it. Nevertheless, there appears to be broad agreement amongst theorists coming from a range of disciplinary backgrounds that play can make an important contribution to children's development.

In contemporary Western society, play is viewed as offering a time and space for the separation of children from the adult world of work and a medium through which young children can make sense of, and feel at home in the world. An evolutionary and biological perspective proposed by play theorist Sutton-Smith suggests that play is *at first a kind of biological prelinguistic enactment with its own claims on human existence* (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 143). Capturing both the resilience of children in their environment, and the notion of play as a resource that continues to be of value throughout life, Sutton-Smith (ibid. p. 231) proposes that play can be understood as *a lifelong simulation of the key neonatal characteristics of unrealistic optimism, egocentricity and reactivity, all of which are guarantors of persistence in the face of adversity*.

A developmental perspective pays attention to signs of maturing, whether of children maturing or, of the maturing of play (Scarlett *et al.*, 2005). In this regard, Fromberg and Bergen (2006 p. xv) highlight what they describe as *the permeable nature of play as it interacts with, parallels, represents and integrates physical, social, emotional, aesthetic and cognitive experiences*. Ethnographic studies have illustrated that young human beings play in all societies (Schwartzman, 1978) although it is recognised that the types and forms of children's play and the amount of play varies depending upon age, gender, cultural contexts and ecological characteristics of the play settings (Armitage, 2005; Bloch and Pellegrini, 1989; Smith and Connolly, 1980; Sutton-Smith, 1997). An anthropological view of play views it as an activity in its own right, where the main motive for children to come together is 'to be where the action is', while researchers have explored questions such as *What is play in itself?* and *What does it mean for the player?* (James, 1998; Strandell, 2000).

A collaborative understanding of play proposed by three 'play advocacy' organisations in the United Kingdom and adopted as underpinning Ireland's *National Play Policy* (2004) captures these multiple perspectives:

*Children's play is freely chosen personally directed behaviour, motivated from within by needs, wants and desires. Play can be fun or serious. Through play children explore social, material and imaginary worlds and their relationship with them, elaborating all the while a flexible range of responses to the challenges they encounter. By playing children learn and develop as individuals, and as members of the community* (National Playing Fields Association, PLAYLINK and the Children's Play Council (2000, p.6 cited in *Ready Steady Play! A National Play Policy*, National Children's Office, 2004).

Over the past 50 years or so, the predominant site of children's free play has moved from public space on the street, to semi-public space such as separate public playgrounds, school yards and ECCE settings. Indeed, the play space for many children has most expanded indoors, in particular, within their own bedrooms where indoor play technologies such as television, video, DVDs, game consoles and computer games have proliferated (Buckingham, 2000). The indoor virtual play landscape of electronic media is sometimes perceived as providing a safe and authentic playing option at a time when children's independent mobility outdoors has been curtailed and 'playing outside' is lamented as a diminishing possibility. Virtual play is also promoted as offering adventure, freedom, mental and imaginative activity, in a space where players can navigate within networks (Kane, 2005). A number of questions arise however. Qualitatively, electronic or virtual play is very different from all other forms of play, whose essence is captured in interactions between players and the physical world (Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005). Virtual play, on the other hand involves playing in

a non-tactile, non-organic, non-sensual world, disembedded from physical space and a concrete sense of community, where the ‘real’ world is distorted and new worlds are created (Kane, 2005; Louv, 2005; Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005). Other important issues arising relate to concerns about the risks to which children are being exposed while accessing the internet; the extent to which electronic play promotes violence; and how play and technology influences family and parent-child relationships. Given the undeniably significant role technology plays in contemporary living, as well as its benefits to society as a whole, a measured and balanced approach to play and technology is advocated. Used appropriately with children, and not as a replacement to the first hand, direct, multi-sensory experiences offered by other forms of play, technology has been demonstrated to enhance young children’s cognitive and social abilities (NAEYC, 1996). Assistive technology can also play an important role in the successful inclusion of young children with additional needs into ECCE settings as well as supporting their learning and development.

When David Elkind first wrote his seminal text *The Hurried Child* in response to what he then perceived as the increasing societal pressure on children to grow up quickly and the consequential stress on children, he concluded that *in the end, a childhood is the most basic right of children* (Elkind, 1981). In 2007, 25 years later, commenting on the greater appreciation of the importance of free, self-initiated, and spontaneous play to the child’s healthy, mental, emotional and social development, he stresses that, *in the end, a playful childhood [emphasis added] is the most basic right of childhood* (Elkind, 2007. p. xvii).

The conceptualisation of play as childhood *right* has been enshrined within the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) since 1989. The stated intention of the UNCRC with respect to play and recreation is to assure to all the world’s children the benefit of a satisfying play life (Brown and Freeman, 2001). The UNCRC has been instrumental both nationally and internationally (David, 1996; National Children’s Office, 2004; Shier, 1995) as governments worldwide are placed under a legal and moral obligation to advance the cause of implementing the rights outlined in the Convention, including the right to play (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, United Nations Children’s Fund and Bernard van Leer Foundation, 2006). Contemporaneously, the notion of ‘play deprivation’ is gaining currency (Hughes, 2003; Louv, 2005; Pellegrini, 2005) particularly as it applies in the early childhood years. Initially the focus of play deprivation studies was on examining the impact of depriving children of physical exercise type play in view of the fact the body’s muscle and skeletal systems are especially in need of exercise during childhood. Reviewing a series of such studies Pellegrini (2005) concludes firstly, that when children are deprived of opportunities to exercise, they over-compensate, or rebound when given the opportunity. Secondly, this need seems to be greater for boys than for girls. More recently, chronic play deprivation, particularly during the period between birth and seven years, has been linked to impaired brain development, lack of social skills, depression and aggression (Hughes, 2003).

#### Key point

Viewing play as a fundamental need and right of all children, and central to their well-being offers a powerful construct with which to legitimise and secure the place of play in the lives of young children at home, in ECCE settings and in public spaces.

## Children’s priorities in their play

Increasingly it is recognised that a secure pedagogy of play needs to include a thorough understanding of the meaning of play activities from the perspectives of the participants (Goncu and Gaskins, 2006; Wood, 2004). When asked about their play activities, children talk about the importance of having fun, being with friends, choosing freely and being outdoors (Bondavalli, Mori and Vecchi, 1993; Clark and Moss, 2001; Manners, 2003; Sutton-Smith, 1997; The Children’s Society, 2007). Children in their first year of life enjoy exploring the immediate environment in the security of being held, which provides physical warmth and security. Observations of children under three years old at play indicate that they are uncomfortable with wide-open spaces, preferring small-scale spaces and the presence of a nurturing adult close by. As they are close to the ground often sitting and crawling on it, details in the ground that are responsive to their exploratory urges are very important (Hendricks, 2001; Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003; Nabhan and Trimble, 1994; Rinaldi, 1998).

Three to six-year-olds prioritised play when consulted about their preferences in ECCE settings in studies conducted in a number of European countries. When asked about their favourite places in an early childhood setting in London outside places were mentioned most frequently by the three to five-year-old children consulted in Clark and Moss' study (2001). A study conducted in Sweden, asked five-year-old children, *what would you like to do in pre-school if you could decide this by yourself?* Most of the children interviewed answered without hesitation *Play!* Some refined this by saying *play with friends* and many emphasised that they preferred to play outside. The five and six-year-olds interviewed by Einarsdottir (2005) in an Icelandic kindergarten similarly prioritised play - particularly play with friends, with open-ended materials, and playing outdoors. National and international studies indicate that children at the transition from early to middle childhood years value free-time and the spontaneity and freedom of play outdoors in contrast to the predominant character of their school day which they view as being under adult control and surveillance (Corsaro, 2005; Devine, 2002, Mayall, 2002; Mac Dougall, *et al.*, 2004; Manners, 2003).

A number of recent Irish studies of children's experiences in ECCE provide further insight into children's perspectives regarding the place of play in their lives. The documented accounts of children's play in a wide range of informal ECCE settings throughout the country reported in *The Power of Play* (IPPA, The Early Childhood Organisation, 2004), suggests that the following are children's key priorities:

- Construction play: especially when children are provided with a variety of open-ended materials
- Creating small spaces
- Transporting
- Playing with water
- Engaging with 'real' work, using real tools often engaging whole body movement
- Re-enacting social, and culturally valued activities through role play
- Being actively involved in story-telling
- Being creative when provided with a wide range of open-ended materials
- Having a sensitive adult close by who values play and who can offer support at key moments.

A further important message indirectly conveyed in this publication is the fun, excitement and energy in play. This is apparent not only for the children but also for key adults, early years practitioners and parents, who are able to tune into children's play scripts and 'go with the flow' of the sometimes unpredictable routes of play.

A further Irish study offers an insight into the place of play within children's experience of transition from pre-school to school (O'Kane and Hayes, 2007). When asked about their favourite things at school, the majority of the responses of the Junior Infant pupils interviewed in the case study school where the research is being undertaken<sup>2</sup>, related to play, and in particular free play. The children identified this form of play as taking place on Friday mornings and they distinguished this from work, the activity they viewed as engaging most of their time in school. The amount of time they could engage in play, and the amount of available play equipment outdoors were viewed as two of the primary markers distinguishing their experience at pre-school from their experiences at school.

A study conducted by Kernan (2006) focussed on one to five-year-old children's experience of play outdoors in four very diverse ECCE settings in Dublin - a workplace crèche, a day-nursery, a community playgroup and a junior infant classroom in an Infant school. By analysing photographic and observational evidence, coupled with conversations with children, it was possible to identify clear patterns across all four settings in terms of what was important to children in their play. These can be summarised under overlapping and connected categories of experience (see Table 1 below), many of which mirror the forms of play highlighted in the IPPA's *The Power of Play* (2004) referred to earlier.

<sup>2</sup> The study, which is ongoing, combines a single case study with nationwide questionnaire completed by early years practitioners (O'Kane and Hayes, 2007).

**Table 1: Children’s priorities in their outdoor play experiences**

Main category	Illustrative examples
<b>Movement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Opportunities for expansive movement, speed</li> <li>■ Opportunities for practising newly acquired physical skills (sometimes alone)</li> <li>■ Transporting self or materials using vehicles and tools</li> <li>■ Moving in and out, indoors to outdoors to indoors</li> </ul>
<b>Vertical expansiveness</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Being high up (on slopes, steps, raised platforms, climbing equipment, trees and slides)</li> <li>■ Sights and sounds overhead</li> </ul>
<b>Finding and constructing small spaces</b>	<p>Small spaces to be:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ with friends in small groups</li> <li>■ to be apart from the crowd</li> <li>■ to observe at a distance</li> <li>■ to hide, or be enclosed</li> </ul>
<b>Transformation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Multi-sensory exploration of nature elements (especially water)</li> <li>■ Finding loose parts, transforming physical environment with loose parts</li> <li>■ House building</li> </ul>
<b>Direct contact with animals, insects and plant life</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Time to observe animals, insects, plant life</li> <li>■ Support by adults to name, to understand, to touch, to care for animal and plant life</li> </ul>
<b>Social experiences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Playing with friends, affiliation and co-operation</li> <li>■ Significant adults being involved in playful interaction and shared interest in discoveries.</li> </ul>

The focus of this part of the paper has been to identify key experiences in play that appear to be most significant from young children’s perspectives. By combining these, with generalised features of children’s play identified by a range of play and childhood ‘experts’ it is possible to synthesise the most salient characteristics of play, which help to define its character, attitude, and disposition, in addition to capturing its appeal for children and its significance for their well-being during the early childhood years. Authors and texts drawn on in compiling the list of characteristics include: Bruce, 1996; Dockett and Fleer, 2002; Garvey, 1977; Lieberman, 1977; Mac Naughton, 2003; Moorcock, 1998; Rogers and Sawyers, 1988; Sutton-Smith, 1997; Wood and Attfield, 2005. Table 2 presents nine characteristics of play that illustrate its complexity, variety as well as its sometimes paradoxical nature.

Children’s intrinsic motivation to play, whatever the social context or available materials, has always been, and continues to be, a key influencing factor in providing for play in ECCE. However, play is included in ECCE curricula not just because children like to play, but *also for its voluntary and experiential features (and) its importance for identity formation, expression and social learning* (Bennett, 2005, p.21). In the following section play is examined specifically within the context of ECCE in terms of its construction as a medium through which children learn and develop.

**Key message**

Increasingly it is recognised that a secure pedagogy of play needs to include a thorough understanding of the meaning of play activities from children’s perspectives.

**Table 2: Characteristics of play**

Characteristic	Description
<b>Play's voluntary nature</b>	Children will choose to play; they cannot be made to play; they may also choose not to be involved; sometimes they may change the direction of the play. The control of the play rests with the players: it belongs to them.
<b>Play's meaningfulness to the players</b>	Play reflects what children already know, have observed and can do. It provides the context for building and extending knowledge, skills and understandings in a way that makes sense to them.
<b>Play is low risk</b>	Children can experiment and be challenged in their play and yet cannot fail. In this sense, play provides a minimum of risks and penalties for mistakes. Play can also be linked to the possibilities of exploring risk - doing something you have never done before, something difficult or trying to do something better than you did the last time.
<b>Play's spontaneity and openness to the surrounding world</b>	Play offers an invitation to the possibilities inherent in things and events. This is often captured in the term 'playfulness', and associated spontaneity, curiosity, flexibility and creativity.
<b>Play is symbolic</b>	Children often pretend and imagine when they play. Play enables them: to transform reality into symbolic representations of the world; to experiment with the meanings and rules of serious life; to try out different ideas, feelings and relationships with people.
<b>Play incorporates deep involvement and sustained concentration</b>	Terms such as 'wallowing', 'flow', and feeling both capable and challenged are often associated with play, invoking the dominance of the means over the end; the process over the product; the sustained concentration that is often apparent when children play.
<b>Play is active</b>	Play involves activity of players. It may be physically active, involving active engagement with the physical environment or exuberant movement, and physical energy. It may also involve mental activity such as in imaginative play or play with words. Often both physical and mental activity will be involved.
<b>Play's sociability</b>	Children are often most satisfied when playing alongside or in co-operation with peers or adults. However, sometimes children prefer and need to play alone.
<b>Joy, sense of humour and excitement</b>	Children engage in play because it is enjoyable in and of itself. They derive pleasure when they draw on their own ideas, often shared with like-minded peers. However, play may not always be a positive experience. Sometimes, play can place a child at risk of being hurt, being called names or being excluded by others.

## The ambiguity of play in early childhood care and education

For more than a century, play has held a rather idealised position within early childhood education. Inspired by the writings of pioneers of early education such as Friedrich Froebel (1782 - 1852), Rachel (1859 - 1917) and Margaret Mc Millan (1860-1931) and Maria Montessori (1870 - 1952), the notion of a natural, active, play-oriented child has been placed firmly at the centre of the early childhood curriculum. This has also been linked to the progressive 'child-centred' approach associated with the work of John Dewey (1859 - 1952). As noted by the authors of the British Education Research Association Special Interest Group on Early Childhood Education (BERA SIG) review of early years research, the ideals of progressivism were consistent with the 'play ethos' in respect to the emphasis on exploration, discovery, hands-on experience, child-initiated activity and the importance of choice, independence and control (BERA, SIG, 2003). Such ideals, particularly active exploration, discovery and hands-on learning, were also highlighted in the principles guiding *An Curaclam na Bunscoile (Primary School Curriculum)* published by the Department of Education in Ireland in 1971 and reiterated in the 1999 revised *Primary School Curriculum* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b).

Today, the maxim that 'children learn through play' continues to constitute pedagogical 'givens' in many early years settings (Anning, Cullen and Fleer, 2004). In such a discourse, play is primarily viewed as an instrument of learning and development but also as the means by which *children learn to be happy, and*

*mentally healthy human beings* (Cannella and Viruru, 1997, p. 124). According to Moyles (2004 p. 9), *play in educational settings should have learning consequences*. However, realising this in practice may not be as straightforward as the persistent ideology of play as ‘the work of childhood’ might suggest. Once one attempts to articulate an agreed pedagogy of play to describe play in practice, and to demonstrate its efficacy in terms of positive learning outcomes, the position of play as the main context for learning in ECCE settings becomes more problematic.

Understandings of play, or what counts as play vary enormously across different ECCE settings and is influenced by a range of factors including: historical and cultural traditions and values; dominant political discourses; whether services are located within the formal education sector or within the care sector; the age to which early childhood curricula or guidelines are targeted; as well as regulatory frameworks (Abbott, 2001; Ailwood, 2003; Blenkin and Kelly, 1997; Bennett, 2005). In Scandinavian countries, play is viewed both as early childhood content and method, the means through which children conceive and make sense of the world, feel in control, express their views, analyse experiences and solve problems. Here, children’s own culture, free play and friendship are afforded high status in early childhood education (Einarsdottir and Wagner, 2006). In contrast, in countries where the pre-primary or readiness for school model of ECCE dominates (Ireland and the UK have been cited as pertinent examples by Bennett, 2005), play tends to be curricularised with an associated need to identify specific purposes or functions of play in children’s learning and development which are often articulated in terms of specific academic subjects. In such contexts, the role of the adult is more directive than indicated in the Nordic model. For example, in the Irish Primary School Curriculum, in the Guidelines for Teachers for infant classes, the mediating role of the teacher in play in English within the strand ‘oral language’ is described as follows:

*Given materials and contexts children will play spontaneously. However, if they are to experience the maximum learning from it the teacher must influence it and direct it* (Department of Education and Science, 1999b, Teacher Guidelines: English, p.42).

The status of play in ECCE is closely related to the timing of the introduction to formal academic skills such as learning to read, to write and to count. The notion that ‘earlier is better’ in relation to the introduction of such skills has been linked to the downward curriculum pressure in schools emanating from governments’ needs for skilled workforces to meet the demands of increasingly competitive global economy. However, it is also linked to parental expectations (Elkind, 2007; Weikart, 1999). Research studies that have examined the effects of differential instructional approaches on young children’s achievement and motivation indicate that if a programme is overly-focussed on formal skills, it is more likely to provide opportunities for children to fail, generate higher anxiety levels and to develop a higher dependency on adults, promoting in children negative perceptions of their own competencies (Sylva and Nabuco, 1996; Stipek et. al 1995 cited in OECD, 2004). It has been suggested that such activities, may have little meaning for young children aside from the fact that success at them pleases their parents (Bettelheim, 1987).

Not surprisingly, the division between play and work and play and academic learning persists as a highly controversial construction in ECCE (Hayes, 2006; Pramling Samuelsson, 2004). Play can be viewed both as the natural vehicle by which young children learn (Anning and Edwards, 2006) and yet may be sidelined in favour of ‘work’ or used as a reward for ‘good’ work. In informal settings such as pre-school playgroups, play can be seen as preparatory to ‘real’ learning in ‘big school’. Once in school, play may not be taken seriously by parents or teachers (Wood and Attfield, 2005), except perhaps as a means of introducing elements of more formal education in an ‘interesting’ or novel way (Hayes, 2004).

Typically, in everyday practice in ECCE, play tends not to be planned in the way ‘serious’ academic work is planned (Pramling Samuelsson, 2004). Some of the features of play such as freedom, spontaneity, exuberance, fun and ownership do not always sit happily or naturally within an educational and prescriptive programme. In some contexts, these tend to be marginalised to the outdoor break, also viewed as the non-teaching, or ‘down tools’ time by adults, where a distinction is made between the outdoors as the arena for non-serious play or running about, recreation, or ‘letting off steam’ and indoors, as the arena for serious work and learning (quiet and sitting down) (Evans and Pellegrini, 1997; Pellegrini, 2005; Kernan, 2006). It is also proposed that play, especially free play, may be difficult to manage within educational contexts because play can change the nature of power relationships—the locus of control is with the children, rather than with the adult (Brown and Freeman, 2001; Wood and Attfield 2005).

One solution to overcoming the dichotomy between play and work and play and academic learning is to refocus attention away from arguing how play serves development to reformulating the playing/working child or playing/learning child where dispositions and processes common to both playing and learning or playing and working are identified (Karlsson Lohmander and Pramling Samuelsson, 2003; Wood and Attfield, 2005). The following elements have been identified as being important for both play and learning: creativity, ‘as if’, mindfulness, and possibility thinking (Pramling Samuelsson, 2004); practice, rehearsal, repetition, mastery and extension (Wood and Attfield, 2005). Arising from such an understanding of the playing-learning child is the responsibility of the early years practitioner to be able to see possibilities for play and learning everywhere in the environment. This challenges the adult to be both child-centred, allowing children keep freedom and self-direct their play and at the same time, be able, when appropriate to direct awareness to different objects, and phenomena in the environment (Pramling Samuelsson, 2004).

#### Key message

One solution to overcoming the dichotomy between play and work and play and academic learning is to refocus attention away from arguing how play serves development to reformulating the playing/working child or playing/learning child where dispositions and processes common to both playing and learning or playing and working are identified.

## Considering the role of adults in children’s play

Whilst the tendency to play is universally acknowledged as being innate, increasingly it is recognised that in order for play to flourish as a truly enjoyable, cognitive, and socially adaptive human ability, adult support is necessary (Singer, 2006). Identifying the precise form and function of that support however, is not easy. In many cultures and communities, parents are young children’s first co-players (Rogoff, 2003). Referring to the importance of parents’ interest, enjoyment and involvement in their children’s play, Bettelheim (1987) notes that it makes a vast difference to the child and his play if he/she can share his/her experiences with an adult who is able to remember childhood experiences around the same kind of play. Patience and timing are critical in parent-child interactions in play. It is important for parents to provide the physical and mental space to children to play with ideas and materials in ways that are most meaningful to them [the children], and not impose their ideas [the parent’s ideas] regarding the ‘proper’ way to play (Bettelheim, 1987).

An important pre-supposition of an effective pedagogy of play suggests that early years practitioners can use their knowledge of the processes and content of children’s play to create content-rich environments that provide a wide range of play possibilities, which promote learning and development, are challenging, engender a feeling of security and wellbeing, and build a sense of community (Bruce, 1987; Hendricks, 2001; Rinaldi, 1998). A wide range of roles can be assigned to the early years practitioner in relation to supporting children’s play in ECCE settings including: play architect, designer, manager, orchestrator; organiser, resourcer, observer, assessor, facilitator, mediator, co-player, scaffolder, trainer and advocate (Bruce, 1996; Dockett and Fleer, 2002; Jones and Reynolds, 1992).

Adults’ roles in children’s play can also be viewed as a continuum between indirect planning for play to direct involvement in the play. At one end of the continuum, adults adopt the role of manager as they organise the time, space and resources that promote play. When they mediate, or interpret the play that occurs, adults become more involved. Direct involvement occurs when adults adopt an active role in the play, when for example the adult engages in parallel play, co-playing or play tutoring (Dockett and Fleer, 2002). The task of the early years practitioner is to make judgements about the most suitable strategies to use based on the knowledge of the individual children, the particular context, whilst also taking account of broader moral, ethical and equity considerations.

Such a continuum of adult involvement in children’s play is evident in the findings of the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) and Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) studies in the UK. Amongst the characteristics associated with highly effective settings [those which led to positive outcomes for children aged three to seven years] included: adult and child involvement; cognitive (co-constructive) engagement and sustained shared thinking between adults and children; and the use of instruction techniques such as modelling and demonstration, explanation and questioning (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

Achieving positive outcomes for young children is dependent on the skills and competence of early years practitioners in a wide number of areas including: sound observational skills; an informed understanding of how children learn through play; being clear on the adult's role, including attention to the processes of play and learning as well as their outcomes (Hurst and Joseph, 1998; Siraj-Blatchford, 2005); awareness of the importance of timing and space considerations in play. It is also important to draw attention, as indicated in the EPPE/REPEY research cited above, that whilst much learning can be achieved through play, it is not the only pathway to learning for young children. Thus when planning a curriculum for young children, a key task for early years practitioners would seem to be creating a balance between giving children time and space to learn through their self-initiated play and providing learning which is more formally negotiated between the child and the adult (Hurst and Joseph, 1998).

#### Key message

Whilst the tendency to play is universally acknowledged as being innate, increasingly it is recognised that in order for play to flourish as a truly enjoyable, cognitive, and socially adaptive human ability, adult support is necessary. The precise nature of this involvement can be viewed as a continuum between indirect planning for play to direct involvement in the play.

## The place of play in early childhood care and education discourses in Ireland: perspectives from policy and practice

In analysing the particular position of play in early childhood education discourses in Ireland, it is noteworthy that serious public policy attention to children's play has been a relatively recent phenomena compared to other countries (National Children's Office, 2004). However, the large number of reports and policy documents published in the broad field of early childhood since the mid-1990s suggests that much greater attention has been paid to early childhood in general in recent years, and with it, consideration of the place of play in young children's learning and development. A number of examples are now drawn upon to illustrate the shifting understandings of childhood play from a policy perspective.

Firstly let us return to the early 1970s and the ground-breaking 1971 *An Curaclam na Bunscoile (Primary School Curriculum)* which foregrounded the holistic and harmonious development of children, and the importance of activity and discovery methods within an integrated curriculum. This curriculum also highlighted the potential of play to enhance children's cognitive, linguistic, social and creative development. When these principles and approaches were revisited and elaborated in the *Primary School Curriculum* (1999), the view of the child as an active agent in his/her learning was particularly emphasised. However, in this respect play appears to hold a relatively marginalized position throughout. In the Introduction to the Curriculum, play is referred to in the context of children's sense of wonder and natural curiosity and in relation to the necessary informality of the learning experience within the curriculum for infant classes. An analysis of the curriculum content of the infant curriculum and the teacher guidelines revealed only a few references to play. When referred to, play is described as requiring teacher structure and direction in order to be beneficial. This might appear to be somewhat at odds with the vision of the child as an active agent in his/her learning underlying the curriculum.

1999 also saw the publication of a White Paper on Early Childhood Education entitled *Ready to Learn*. One of only two references to play was with respect to the recommendation that curricular guidelines should account for the need for structure and learning through play (Department of Education, 1999a, p. 56). The second specific mention to play was in the section addressing children with special needs and the need for both structured and unstructured approaches to play. A third Governmental report published in 1999, which referred to children's play, was the *National Childcare Strategy* authored by the Expert Working Group on Childcare under aegis of Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. Attention to the provision of opportunities to play was incorporated under 'Needs and Rights of Children', the first of five overall guiding principles underpinning the Strategy. This marked a shift in policy towards considering play, indoors and outdoors, as both a need and right of young children (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999). The positioning of play as childhood right at this juncture in Irish policy was largely due to the growing

impact of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (1989) following its ratification by Ireland in 1992 as well as advocacy work by organisations in Ireland such as the Children's Rights Alliance. One year later Ireland's first National Children's Strategy *Our Children, Their Lives* (Department of Health and Children 2000) was published. Highlighted in its objectives are the need to support children's development and experience of childhood through quality early years services and the need to enhance the experience of childhood through access to play opportunities including play in public space, incorporating both natural and built environments.

An 'outsider' policy perspective of pedagogical practices in relation to play became available when the OECD *Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy in Ireland* was published in 2004. The reviewers' brief summation of the experience of play in ECCE in Ireland was highly critical. Regarding their observations in informal childcare settings, the authors remarked on the overabundance of ready-to-buy plastic toys, an emphasis on table top games, puzzles and work cards rather than on interactive, self-directed learning and a neglect of outdoor play provision. In junior infant classes in the primary school sector, the overall impression was of didactic, whole class teaching, with children sitting quietly at tables where play was often used as a means of delivering a curricular goal or a pre-academic skill. The authors also drew attention to the large group sizes and the absence of specific regulations for the training of teachers of the younger children, as well as for classroom design, organisation and equipment (OECD, 2004). It is important to note some infant classrooms are characterised by high adult to child ratios which can impact on the role of the teacher and the availability of opportunities for child-initiative, free play and peer interactions.

The impetus for the development of Ireland's first National Play Policy, *Ready Steady Play!* came from concern articulated forcefully by children regarding the lack of play opportunities in Ireland (National Children's Office, 2004). The overarching aim of the Play Policy was to improve the quality of life of children living in Ireland through the provision of more play opportunities. The play policy has resulted in a significant increase in the number of public play spaces available to children around the country. Although its prime focus is on public play opportunities, the Play Policy included attention to play in 'childcare' and 'school' settings in its four-year action plan. One of the 52 Actions of the policy was that the revised *Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations* would have a greater emphasis on the importance of play in child development. This action has now been realised with play being indirectly referenced in Article 5 of the revised *Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations 2006*. The article states that

A person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the service, through the provision of appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment, and having regard to the age and stage of development of the child and the child's cultural context.

A second action states that the Department of Education and Science will request Boards of Management of Primary Schools to include a statement about the value of play and enhanced opportunities for play as part of their overall school plan. An action, described as 'ongoing' noted that teacher training would *continue to promote the benefits of play both in the schoolyard and in the classroom* (National Children's Office, 2003, p.59-60)<sup>3</sup>.

The *National Play Policy* and NCCA's ongoing task to develop a *National Framework for Early Learning*<sup>4</sup> dovetailed the development of *Síolta, The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education* by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE, 2006). Play is one of the twelve principles underpinning the Quality Framework, which are translated into practice in the form of 16 Standards of Quality. Critically, each standard applies across all 'types' of early childhood provision and includes sessional services, full and part-time day care, infant classes and childminding. An understanding of play as central to young children's well-being, development and learning is once again reiterated and emphasised in this document, designed to guide all early years practitioners/childminders in the provision of quality services for young children.

<sup>3</sup> In this regard, it is of note that no reference was made to the content of training of early years practitioners outside the formal school sector.

<sup>4</sup> As noted earlier, *The Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

Thus, in the past decade, children's play moved from a relatively marginal position in State early childhood education policy to a place where it is, at least in aspiration, valued, supported and holding a prominent position in policy and practice guidelines in relation to ECCE provision within the diverse range of settings in Ireland. However, a key question arising concerns the gap between aspiration and action, between policy and practice, between vision and everyday reality. Such a 'gap' was identified by the National Economic Social Forum (NESF, 2005) as characterising ECCE policy activity in Ireland. Discontinuities between vision and reality also emerge in a small number of qualitative and quantitative studies with respect to everyday pedagogical practices in ECCE settings, both formal and informal. These provide valuable insight into day-to-day realities in ECCE settings in Ireland as well as highlighting the diverse understandings of play in pedagogical practices.

Based on a survey of IPPA membership working in a wide variety of types of informal ECCE, a key focus of Carswell's (2002) work was on early years practitioners' interpretation of play and learning<sup>5</sup>. The resulting explorative research paper noted two conflicting understandings of the playing/learning process and the adults' role in that process. On the one hand early years practitioners conceptualised play as the child's individual learning process whilst guided by adults who are aware of developmental milestones. On the other hand, early years practitioners described formal learning activities, or 'extrinsically motivated activity' which Carswell interpreted from responses as having the dual function of producing and inducing socially acceptable, culturally approved rules and norms. He comments on the 'fine line' between intrinsic motivation and external structuring of children's everyday play activities, noting the uncertain, complicated and ambiguous role of early years practitioners in the play process.

The purpose of Murphy's study (2006), also a questionnaire survey of early years practitioners<sup>6</sup>, was to gauge the extent to which the child-centred guidelines informing the two most recent Irish primary school curricula were being implemented in infant classroom practice. The respondents were all senior infant teachers and the average class size was 27 pupils (pupil to teacher ratios of respondent classes ranged from 14 to 1 to 36 to 1). Amongst the key findings was that whole-class, large-group, parallel instruction was being used 'frequently' or 'very frequently' by 85% of the surveyed teachers and just 22% of teachers indicated that they facilitated child-directed activities 'often' within their classrooms. Teachers also commented on the poor resources and the absence of basic play equipment in their classrooms. When asked to indicate how often they used structured and unstructured play activities, 61% responded that they used such approaches either 'frequently' or 'very frequently'.

The dominance of teacher directed activities noted in Murphy's results were similarly observed in the earlier IEA Preprimary Project, a large cross-national and observational study of the experiences of four-year olds in ECCE settings (Hayes, *et al.*, 1997). In a meta-analysis of the Irish findings from this study, relating to children's experiences in the 55 school settings included in the study, Hayes (2004) noted that most observations recorded children in activities selected by the teacher, with limited freedom to choose activities other than those suggested. Findings also indicated a low level of child-child or adult-child interactions with children mainly observed working silently. The average group size of the junior infant classes researched was 25. Adult: child ratios ranged from 1 to 11 to 1 to 34.

The focus of Kernan's study (2006) was on constructions of a 'good' childhood as enacted in the outdoor play experience in ECCE settings in urban environments in Ireland. Whilst it was possible to conclude from the wide-ranging data that there was a clear ideology linking the outdoors to the construction of a good childhood in theory, this was not viewed as possible in practice. Survey data, representing the experiences of 1,236 ECCE providers nationwide<sup>7</sup> suggested that outdoor provision was very uneven in respect to both access and the diversity of physical environmental features present. A number of additional structural conditions were identified as militating against the actualisation of positive experiences outdoors in everyday

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<sup>5</sup> Analysis based on 180 completed questionnaires incorporating 6,644 qualitative responses (Carswell, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Analysis in this study was based on 186 completed questionnaires (Murphy, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> The researcher collaborated with POBAL in the inclusion of a number of questions regarding outdoor provision in the 2005 Annual Beneficiary Questionnaire to recipients of Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme Funding (Kernan, 2006).

life both at home and in ECCE settings. One important factor was the negative perceptions of Irish weather and the tendency for adults to socialise young children to the view that it is preferable to be indoors unless it is mild and dry outdoors. A second factor emerging was the persistent influence of an historical educational tradition that has prioritised indoor teaching of 'the basics' (reading, writing and arithmetic) over learning and development outdoors. Related to both these were limitations on children's capacity to exercise choice and achieve a personal balance between indoors and outdoors. A further factor impacting on actualising positive experiences outdoors was the tension between children's need for exploration, challenge and risk and the pervasive litigation and car transport culture and heightened anxieties regarding children outdoors. Finally, the erosion of natural garden spaces where children can play outdoors was also identified as limiting outdoor experiences (Kernan, 2006).

The combined evidence from policy documentation and research on practice suggests that there is a mismatch between vision of best practice in ECCE in relation to play and current realities. In most current policy documentation play is prioritised as holding a central position in relation to supporting children's well-being, learning and development and therefore considered a key component in ECCE curricula. On the other hand a range of structural conditions, such as group sizes, restricted physical space, poor design and lack of resources, coupled with and interacting with pedagogical styles emphasising teacher direction, rather than child-initiative suggest that a coherent pedagogy of play may be currently absent in much ECCE provision in Ireland. A further important policy and practice issue which is commanding increased attention, is the extent to which all young children in Ireland, whatever their ability, ethnicity, language, socio-economic background, experience an equally satisfying play life which supports their well-being, learning and development. This issue is addressed in greater detail in Section 2 of this paper.

**Key message**

In the past decade, children's play has moved from a relatively marginal position in State early childhood education policy to a place where it is, at least in aspiration, valued, supported and holding a prominent position in policy and practice guidelines in relation to ECCE provision within the diverse range of settings in Ireland. However, a key question arising concerns the gap between aspiration and action, between policy and practice, between vision and everyday reality.

## Section 2: Theorising play in early childhood

### Researching the forms, functions and benefits of children's play

As a topic of academic study within the sciences, play has traditionally 'belonged' to developmental psychologists, and applied in practice, early childhood educators dominate (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Reflecting the influence of developmental psychology and child development on ECCE, the dominant pedagogical discourse includes references to 'play stages', 'growth', 'natural development', 'readiness' and 'needs' (Burman, 1994; Hartley, 1993; Woodrow, 1999). Within such a discourse, the progressive and universal nature of children's play is a powerful construct. Play is understood both to represent the quintessential child developmental activity (Newson and Newson, 1979; Pellegrini and Bjorklund, 1998) and as serving basic developmental functions (Sutton-Smith, 1994; Strandell, 2000). Rather than focussing on whether play causes developmental changes or whether developmental advances cause changes in play, increasingly these two understandings of play are merged to explore how developmental changes and play development interact to enhance both (Garner and Bergen, 2006).

### Historical perspectives

Up to the mid-nineteenth century, ECCE services had been based on philosophical, spiritual and romantic ideals as in the Froebelian Kindergarten or the rational, moralising and civilising beliefs of the British Infant School. Industrialisation's need for labour also induced women to set up day-care provision for the youngest children of working mothers. By the end of the nineteenth century, these approaches to early childhood education began to draw on the emerging medical and psychological knowledge. Adults working with children whether early years practitioners, psychologists, social reformers, therapists, playground organisers, all used children's motivation to play to facilitate their own intentions and interventions (Kernan, 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Critically, observing children at play came to be viewed as providing the adult investigator with insight into child competence in a number of areas (Pellegrini and Bjorklund, 1998). This function of play persists in ECCE. Play continues to be viewed as an important assessment tool whereby early years practitioners can gauge the interest, the level of understanding, the reasoning and social skills of individual children through skilled observation (Hayes, 2003). Observation during play also focuses early years practitioners' attention on the uniqueness of each child, including his/her experiences and interests and the extent to which these are being supported (Jones and Reynolds, 1992).

Inspired by Friedrich Froebel amongst others, Margaret McMillan's original nursery garden school established in London, was an expression of the idea of human growth and nurture and an ideal setting for young children (Steedman, 1990). In her book *The Nursery School* first published in 1919, McMillan provides detailed information regarding the specific role different elements of a nursery garden were perceived to have in the nurture and education of young children including sensory stimulation and opportunities for physically active play, and challenge. Sensory development and tasks requiring purposeful effort, work and challenge, both indoors and outdoors, were also valued by Maria Montessori in her vision for the education of the young child. A key aspect of her pedagogy was the prepared environment. The function of this multi-sensory, child-centred environment was to support a sense of independence and an awareness of the child's own ability to do things for him/her self, with as little direct help as possible from the adult (Montessori, 1998).

Between the 1930s and 1950s psychoanalytic ideas, represented initially in the work of Sigmund Freud, which emphasised children's emotional needs and natural development began to make an impact on ECCE (Burman, 1994). Child psychoanalysts, such as Melanie Klein and Anna Freud, viewed play's function as emotional expression and release. Susan Isaacs was particularly well known for adapting the psychoanalytic technique to the educational needs of children. She considered play essential for the healthy emotional development of children. At the beginning of the 21st century, play in child psychotherapy continues to be standard clinical practice whereby children use play to work through and master complex psychological difficulties of the past and present guided by a play therapist (Bettelheim, 1987; Russ, 2004). It has also been documented how children commandeer play when facing troubles such as illness or medical procedures, without the guidance of formal play therapy (Clarke, 2006)<sup>8</sup>. In emergency and conflict situations, play has been demonstrated to have an important role in supporting children recover from trauma (Engle, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Clarke (2006) uses the term *child-initiated therapeutic play* in this respect, to distinguish it from play therapy.

**Key message**

Rather than focussing on whether play causes developmental changes or whether developmental advances cause changes in play, increasingly these two understandings of play are merged to explore how developmental changes and play development interact to enhance both.

**Describing the relationship between play, learning and development**

Explaining play in terms of different types of play as well as researching play as an aid to cognitive, social and socio-linguistic development dominated developmental psychologists concerns for much of the 20th century. By the end of the century there were substantive claims for the value and significance of play in language and literacy learning (Roskos and Christie, 2000); emotional development (Erikson, 1963; Fein, 1985); social competence and peer group affiliation (Parten, 1932; Garvey, 1977; Giffin, 1984; Vygotsky, 1978); spatial and mathematical learning (Guha, 1988); and the development of positive learning dispositions and orientations (Lieberman, 1977; Sylva, Bruner and Genova, 1976). Parten's (1932) categorization of play in terms of progressive levels of social participation was significant because it emphasised the role of social interaction in play. However, in more recent times, Parten's formulation has been criticised for implying that playing alone was less advanced, and that older children engaging in solitary play were socially immature. She also underestimated very young children's ability to engage in social interaction and this has led to the erroneous view that babies and toddlers do not play 'properly' (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003).

Piaget's (1962) conceptualisation of play as developing in stages defined by qualitatively different levels of thinking and increased levels of knowledge was particularly influential in ECCE. His constructivist approach, which is summarised in the research paper *Children's early learning and development* (French, 2007) suggested a dialogue between the child's cognitive structures, internal rules for processing information, and the external world. His cognitive play theory, which focused on the individual's interaction with the environment has been attributed as the basis for a 'laissez-faire' free play curriculum, where children make the choices with the adult intervening as little as possible. This is often positioned in contrast to Vygotsky's social-cultural theory of development, which emphasised the role of adults and peers in development and learning (Smith, 1993).

Vygotsky argued that whilst play was not the predominant feature of childhood, it was a leading factor in development (Berk and Winsler, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). His attention was focused on the cognitive functioning and social rules involved in maintaining peer interaction in socio-dramatic play<sup>9</sup>. His elevation of socio-dramatic play, as the most valued form of play in early childhood has been hugely influential in early childhood pedagogy (Bodrova and Leong, 2005; Karlsson Lohmander and Pramling Samuelsson, 2003). His theoretical framework, incorporating the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZDP), challenged the efficacy of a free-play curriculum, and suggested that adults need to take an active role in stimulating learning in the context of play. However, this did not mean formal academic teaching. Rather learning was understood as taking place in interactions between children and adults, between peers and in the context of real-life everyday situations.

A typology of play considered useful in describing the different forms of children's play is that developed by Hutt, *et al.*, (1979/1989). Here, play is grouped into three categories: epistemic, ludic and games with rules. *Epistemic* play, typically associated with children in the first two years of life, refers to exploratory play with objects and materials whereby children gather knowledge about the world through their senses. *Ludic* play refers to children's imaginative, fantasy and socio-dramatic play i.e. 'what if' scenarios or pretence. In *games with rules*, children design their own games with negotiated rules and in time. They also partake in more conventional games with 'external' rules.

<sup>9</sup> Vygotsky identified two critical features of pretend play that described its uniqueness. Firstly, all representational play creates an imaginary situation that permits children to grapple with unrealizable desires and so promote self-regulation. Secondly, play always contains rules for behaviour (Berk and Winsler, 1995).

**Table 3: Hutt's typology of play**

PLAY				
EPISTEMIC BEHAVIOUR		GAMES WITH RULES	LUDIC BEHAVIOUR	
Problem solving		Co-operative	Symbolic	
Exploration		Games of chance	Representative object	Immaterial fantasy
		Games of skill	Fantasy object	Fantasy person roles
Productive		Competitive	Repetitive	Innovative
Materials	Acquisition of skills			Perserverative

(Hutt, (1979), as cited in *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, NCCA, 2004, p.45)

The prevailing approach to considering play in ECCE pedagogy throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s was to link the provision of different types of play to the principal domains of child development and to look for developmental progression or 'signs of maturing' within specific play behaviours. The notion of 'developmentally appropriate practice' (DAP) as set out in a document published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp and Copple, 1992) in the United States, was particularly influential and became a powerful construct in Western ECCE practice. (See French (2007) for further discussion). Play as an important vehicle for children's all round development, as well as a reflection of their development is one of the key principles informing DAP (Nutbrown, 2006). Different forms of play incorporate cognitive, social, emotional, physical and moral challenges and support children to develop strengths in a range of areas. Table 4 summarises what are commonly viewed as the most salient forms of play in terms of the holistic development of the child. The NCCA's *Framework for Early Learning* moves away from the earlier approach to linking the provision of different types of play to the principal domains of child development and to view the child instead as developing through four interconnected themes - Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating and Exploring and Thinking (NCCA 2004). Just as domains of children's development are closely related and intertwined, so too, are the different forms of play. In practice, when children are playing, their behaviours may reflect more than one type of play identified above. Furthermore, children often display preferences for particular types of play. Importantly, the focus of the play is often not determined by age, but rather on the context in which play takes place a topic that is addressed in the following section.

**Table 4: Key forms of play in early childhood**

**Exploratory play:** using physical skills and sensations to learn about materials and their properties, what they feel like and what can be done with them.

**Constructive play:** the manipulation of objects and materials to build or create something using natural or manufactured materials such as blocks, playdough, junk and collage materials, sand and water. Involves creating, recognizing and solving problems.

**Creative play:** using open-ended materials such as art materials and natural materials in ways that encourage fluency, flexibility, originality imagination, embellishment and making novel connections.

**Pretend, fantasy and socio-dramatic play:** includes: role play, pretending with objects, pretend actions and situations, persistence within the imaginary play frame to create a play episode or event. When it involves interaction and verbal communication with one or more play partners regarding the play event it is termed socio-dramatic play (Monighan Nourot, 2006).

**Physical locomotor play:** activities that involve all kinds of physical movement for their own sake and enjoyment. In this type of play a range of fine or gross motor skills are practised and mastered.

**Language or word play:** unrehearsed and spontaneous manipulation of sounds, and words often with rhythmic and repetitive elements. As children get older, this kind of play often incorporates rhyme, word play and humour.

## **Towards a socio-cultural and ecological understanding of play in early childhood care and education**

Beginning in the 1980s, a new awareness of the importance of interactional and reciprocal relations in human-environment interactions (Moore, 1985) developed. This coincided with the broader cultural context for learning and development (Hogan, 2005) emphasised in Vygotsky's work and highlighted in the research papers (French, 2007 and Hayes, 2007). Some psychologists also began to give attention to the play and developmental potential of different styles of play environments, indoors and outdoors (Heft, 1988; Moore, 1985; Smith and Connolly, 1980). Thus, a socio-ecological or cultural-ecological awareness began to enter consideration of children's experiences including their experiences of play. By the 1990s, there was also a growing acknowledgement that 'child development' (the body of theoretical knowledge and research description) reflected a minority of world childhoods based mainly on North American and European childhoods as studied from the perspectives of North American and European researchers (Woodhead, Faulkner and Littleton, 1998). Children have different experiences including different play experiences depending on their home, community, cultural and societal context.

The awareness of learning as a socio-dynamic process was highlighted by many including Bruner (1996) and Rogoff (1990). As noted in the research paper *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood* Hayes (2007) highlights that learning is a social process, and children from the very earliest, are active participants in the shared construction of knowledge. In this regard, Bronfenbrenner's influential Socio-cultural model and later Bio-ecological model of human development are useful frames of reference (Bronfenbrenner and Ceci, 1994) when describing mediating processes in everyday experiences in ECCE including play. These include: child and adult personal characteristics; reciprocal interactions between adult and child and between child and child; opportunities for group and solitary play; and the degree to which *objects and symbols in the immediate environment invites attention, exploration, manipulation, elaboration and imagination* (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998, p. 997).

Building on Vygotsky's work, Rogoff's socio-cultural view of development draws attention to the notion of children both shaping and being shaped by social and physical environments (Rogoff, 2003). Development is conceptualised as a process of transformation of participation in socio-cultural activities. One of the issues noted by Rogoff (2003) is that communities vary in expectations regarding whether parents serve as 'playmates' of young children. Thus, whilst it is typical in middle class European and European-American

and Chinese families for parents to act as toddlers' playmates or as conversational peers, this is not typical in other communities where siblings and other extended family members take on the role of playmates. Rogoff (2003) also draws attention to differences in themes in pretend play cross-culturally, remarking that in communities in which children participate in the 'mature life' of a community, they often play at adult work and social roles. Where children are segregated from the adult community, their play less commonly reflects 'mature activity' *rather children emulate what they have had a chance to observe, such as television superheroes or adult TV drama* (Rogoff, 2003, p. 299).

Coupled with the attention to children's interactions with others is a focus on children's interactions with the environment. In a 1985 article titled, *The state of the art in play environment*, Moore describes this shift in thinking as follows:

*The 'environment' impinging on child development is not only physical or designed environment but also social and cultural; the child and the total socio-physical environment are united in a complex ecology.* (Moore, 1985, p.172)

One useful concept, which has been utilised by researchers coming from an ecological perspective seeking to understand children's encounters in their everyday worlds is that of *affordance*. This concept is increasingly being utilised within ECCE research to describe the relationship between children and their environment. The term *affordance* was originally coined by perception psychologist James Gibson (1979) and explained as follows: *the affordances of the environment are what it offers [an individual] ... what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill* (Gibson, 1979, p. 127). Affordance implies the complementarity of the individual and the environment. It refers to the perceived and actual properties of physical resources in the environment (fixed features of physical structure, objects, tools) and how they are used. One of the first researchers to utilise Gibson's concept of affordance in describing children's encounters with the physical environment was Heft (1988). He proposed a functional taxonomy of children's outdoor environments, which subsequently became influential amongst some play environment designers and researchers. Heft's taxonomy comprised 10 categories as follows: 1. Flat relatively smooth surface; 2. Relatively smooth slope; 3. Graspable/detached object; 4. Attached object; 5. Non rigid, attached object; 6. Climbable feature; 7. Aperture (admitting light); 8. Shelter; 9. Moldable material (e.g. dirt, sand); 10. Water. Each category was further defined in terms of its affordances. For example 'Shelter' affords: microclimate, prospect, refuge, privacy. Moldable material affords construction of objects, pouring, modification of its surface features. The value of such an approach was that it offered a way of thinking about environments that was fundamentally active and goal directed (Heft, 1988) and which supported children's activity, curiosity, exploration and creativity.

One application of the concept of affordance has been the recommendation from designers and educators to include pieces of playground equipment or materials that have more than one affordance (van Liempd, 1999). This concept is often linked to play value (Jacobs and Moore, 2002) and playability and the importance of open-ended materials. A more recent focus of interest has been to examine affordances in the context of the socio-cultural world, including the analysis of the diversity of potential affordances available to children in different contexts and the degree to which they are actualised, or promoted or constrained [by adults] (Kernan, 2006; Kytta, 2002, 2004; Reed, 1996). These have particular relevance for the experience of play in the ECCE settings and will be revisited in Section 3 of the paper.

Whilst the notion of play as a universal activity of childhood still holds, this is qualified with reference to the fact that important variations occur in children's play as a function of economic, social and cultural structure of communities in which children live and the affordances of the physical environments available to children in their everyday lives. A key question arising from this analysis is the extent to which all children, whatever their gender, colour, ethnicity, ability have an equally satisfying play life within ECCE settings. This topic is now addressed by examining play in the context of diversity and equal opportunities.

#### Key message

Whilst the notion of play as a universal activity of childhood still holds, this is qualified with reference to the fact that important variations occur in children's play as a function of economic, social and cultural structure of communities in which children live and the affordances of the physical environments available to children in their everyday lives.

## Equality of opportunity in play

A diversity and equity approach to ECCE is based on the principles of inclusiveness (everyone belongs) and an appreciation of and respect for the origins of all (van Keulen, 2004). A number of general key issues have been identified as warranting attention when reflecting on the meaning of such an approach in everyday practice in ECCE. Firstly, areas of 'difference', such as gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic background are fundamental parts of children's identity and have a significant impact on their experiential life including their experience of play. Secondly, the early years is a time when children are actively constructing images of themselves by comparing and contrasting themselves to others in their immediate everyday environments such as the home and the ECCE setting. This process is also influenced by the views of significant adults in their lives as well as media images and children's own observations. Thirdly, all children are receptive to positive and negative behaviours including misinformation and stereotypes about certain groups. Fourthly, the first time young children come across diversity in society is often in an ECCE setting. Therefore, it is important for early years practitioners to keep to the fore that diversity, equal opportunities and inclusion are not just minority issues, but affect the majority and therefore are important issues for all ECCE settings (Mac Naughton, 2003; Murray and O'Doherty, 2001; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004).

A number of researchers in the field have drawn attention to the power every adult has to affect (for good or bad) the self-identity, behaviour, actions, understandings, and beliefs of the children they interact with (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Nutbrown, 1996; Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). Good practice in equal opportunities in ECCE indicates a proactive role for early years practitioners with respect to diversity and children's play (Derman-Sparks, 1989; French, 2003; Nutbrown, 1996). This involves reflecting all children's backgrounds and abilities in the design, resourcing and images displayed in ECCE environments; actively supporting bi/multilingualism; being non-judgemental, and valuing a range of family forms, cultures and child-rearing practices, guiding children's developing attitudes and empowering them to stand up for themselves and others, and to feel proud of their own identity; supporting their sense of belonging through their experiences of play; carefully challenging and acting on discriminatory remarks and actions (Dickins and Denzeloe, 1998; Mac Naughton, 2003; Murray and O'Doherty, 2001; Nutbrown, 1996).

This places to the fore the moral and ethical dimensions of pedagogical work, which is often absent from discussions regarding the role of the early years practitioner (Brown and Freeman, 2001). Providing a slightly different perspective on the role of the adult in children's play, with particular focus on reflecting on the moral implications of adults creating play spaces, mediating disputes, allocating resources and permitting or forbidding aggressive, sexual or exclusionary activities, Brown and Freeman (2001) pose the following questions which are useful when thinking about sharing power amongst the stakeholders in a ECCE setting:

- Can children decide how long, with whom or what to play?
- How do adults enforce their own perceptions of what is "right" when they determine what children ought or ought not to do?
- How should adults equip and organise early years settings?
- How do adults respond when their version of what is appropriate is at odds with children's interests and inclinations? (Brown and Freeman, 2001).

When addressing moral, ethical or equity issues as they arise in planning for and evaluating children's play, there is general agreement that a key starting point is the importance of early years practitioners reflecting on their own personal values, as well as the professional values of the organisation or setting where they work. The policies of ECCE settings with regard to play and equal opportunities need deliberate and careful consideration, and should not be explained in terms of 'that's the way it's always been done' (Brown and Freeman, 2001). There also needs to be on-going monitoring and regular evaluation (French, 2003).

In illustrating some of the above issues as they might arise in day-to-day practice in ECCE settings, three areas of diversity which have direct influence on the experience of play are discussed briefly: gender; culture and ethnicity; and ability. Whilst discussed in separate subsections, these are not viewed as mutually exclusive categories. In reality, beliefs and values about gender, culture and ethnicity, and ability frequently intersect in play (Mac Naughton, 1998).

**Key message**

A diversity and equity approach to ECCE is based on the principles of inclusiveness (everyone belongs) and an appreciation of and respect for the origins of all.

**Boys and girls playing**

In the first two years of life, there is little evidence that children choose playmates or have play preferences on the basis of gender. The separation of boys and girls into social groupings and specific patterns of play begins at around three years of age (Pellegrini, 2005). Between the ages of three and six years same sex groups or dyads increasingly constitute the context within which children's social experience occurs (Maccoby, 1998). With the emergence of pretend or fantasy play, gender differences are evident in the dominance of domestic and nurturing themes and co-operative role taking in girl's play and the preference of boys for a world of superheroes or themes associated with danger, dominance, fighting or competition (Holland, 2003b; Maccoby, 1998). Furthermore, whereas girls avoid physically active behaviours in order to interact, boys are stimulated to high levels of activity by other boys (Maccoby, 1998; Pellegrini, 2005).

Such gender differences in play behaviours and play preferences can be explained by a complex interplay of biological and social factors. One biological explanation is that overall; boys are more active relative to girls (Pellegrini, 2005). It has also been suggested that there is some degree of prenatal hormonal priming involved in boys' greater propensity towards more physical and aggressive like play (Maccoby, 1998). Additionally, from a very early age children are learning gender stereotypes. That is, they are learning the cultural standards and practices regarding the behaviour of the two sexes and how society expects them to behave. From their pre-school years children will *attempt to adapt themselves to these standards and practices by behaving in 'sex-appropriate' ways* (Maccoby, 1998, p. 182).

One form of play where 'gender' differences have been observed to be to the fore is rough and tumble play. Rough and tumble play is closely related to play fighting and superhero play. The peak frequency of such play occurs at around four years and is more common amongst boys. It is characterised by high-energy behaviours and exaggerated movements such as running, chasing, fleeing, or wrestling. Critically, the intent is playful and not aggressive and it can be identified by smiles or a 'play face' (Maccoby, 1998). Rough and tumble, war, weapon and superhero play are often the source of controversy in ECCE settings (in English speaking cultures) because of their association with aggression, anti-social behaviours and general disruption (Holland, 2003a; Brown and Freeman, 2001). Furthermore, it is suggested that there is a link between the dominant feminisation of ECCE and an inherent bias in favour of girls' indoor, socio-dramatic play and against the boys' greater physicality, super-hero and outdoor play preferences (Bilton, 2002; Holland, 2003a; Reid, 2004; Sutton-Smith, 1994). One response to addressing the feminisation of ECCE and its inherent bias to indoor, sedentary, quiet, social play, is to ensure that both socio-dramatic play and construction play opportunities are available and supported indoors and outdoors (Bilton, 2002; Holland, 2003b; Perry, 2001).

Whilst research indicates that gender stereotyping appears remarkably resistant to change by early childhood programmes (MacNaughton, 2006), it is important for early years practitioners and parents to realise that the development of gender identity is an active process. An important task for key adults in young children lives as recommended in the Anti-bias Curriculum (Derman-Sparks, 1989) is to support children's understanding that being a boy or girl depends on anatomy and not what they like to do or wear. Boys and girls need to be provided with and supported to take part in a number of different types of play. The curriculum (*ibid*) also highlights the need to support girls to understand that they can be competent in all areas, and to support boys to feel competent without feeling and acting superior to girls. The wisdom of forcing 'underground' overt expressions of sexuality, gender and ethnic identity, aggression, power and mastery that are often part of play themes in early childhood has also been questioned. As noted by Brown and Freeman (2001), *when this play is hidden from view children miss the opportunity to seek adults' support or feedback to help them to make sense of it or the feelings it elicits* (p. 268).

**Key message**

It is important for early years practitioners and parents to realise that the development of gender identity is an active process.

**Culture and ethnic diversity**

Research cited earlier has drawn attention to the importance of considering cultural context when considering the differing styles of play engaged in by children coming from different ethnic backgrounds. Applying middle-class English language or European Western values and understandings of play when providing for and assessing the play of non-Western children or Traveller children may lead to a deficit view of the play of children and lead to children not feeling valued or not having a sense of belonging. The following issues have been highlighted as being important for early years practitioners in planning for play for all children and ensuring that individual children's existing expertise and cultural experiences in play can be further developed (Dockett and Flear, 2002):

1. *Move beyond Western theories of play for analysing play*
2. *Note the range of expression of pretend play evident across cultures*
3. *Determine the value play has for particular cultural groups prior to planning*
4. *Develop programs which recognise and support different cultural or multi-cultural approaches to play*
5. *Observe play in terms of culture and gender and deconstruct interactional patterns together with children and their families to ensure equity for all children (Flear, 1997, cited in Dockett and Flear, 2002, p.129).*

A number of practical planning, resourcing and everyday pedagogical practices can contribute to ensuring equality of opportunity in play including: provision of kitchen implements from different ethnic groups in the dramatic play/home corner; ensuring dolls and small people figures include men and women from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds; talking about children's skin, hair, eye colour and hair texture; regularly reading appealing picture books that depict gender, racial, ethnic and physical ability diversity; encouraging children to use their home language in the ECCE setting whenever they are so inclined<sup>10</sup>. Adults need to pay particular attention to supporting the communicative strategies of children whose first language is neither English nor Irish.

**Key message**

It is important to consider cultural context when considering the differing styles of play engaged in by children coming from different ethnic backgrounds.

**Diversity in ability**

Children demonstrate a wide range of skills, abilities, knowledge and understanding and all have the right to engage in play experiences. There is general agreement in the literature that in order for young children with disabilities to access play in ECCE settings, the focus should be on what children can do, their strengths and their potential, rather than what they cannot do. A second general principle is the importance of focussing on adapting or changing the activity, rather than on trying to change disabled children to fit into an existing programme (Dickins and Denziloe, 1998; Noonan and McCormick, 2006; Odom, 2002).

If children with disabilities are relaxed and valued in a setting, they are more likely to engage in and initiate and sustain play (Sayeed and Guerin, 2000). Early years practitioners' expectations and attitudes are important and can affect the process of the play experience including the adult-child relationship and child-child relationships. In an inclusive setting the aim should be, wherever possible, to make the usual range of play and learning opportunities offered indoors and outdoors accessible to disabled children (Dickins and Denziloe, 1998; Odom, 2002), ensuring that they have freedom and opportunity to explore, to create, to take risks, to make choices, to accept challenge and to develop friendships (Sayeed and Guerin, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Derman-Sparks (1989), French (2003) and Murray and O'Doherty (2001) all provide more extensive guidelines on this topic.

Modifications and adaptations to the environment/activity do not necessarily require enormous expense. In fact the advice is that they should be kept as simple as possible and should only be changed to the extent that is absolutely necessary to accomplish the desired purpose. Amongst the practical considerations addressed by Noonan and McCormick (2006) for children with limited motor abilities and/or health impairments include: the optimal positioning of all activities to allow children to relax, to focus attention on the activity and sufficient controlled movement for independent functioning; incorporate items that are large, and easy to grasp in the dramatic play area; provide a variety of surfaces for painting<sup>11</sup>. Clearly, the best way to develop inclusive play is to consider the particular strengths and needs of the individual children in an ECCE setting. At all times, it is also important to display positive images [in play materials, books, posters] of disabled adults and children in the ECCE environment participating fully in everyday life (Dickins and Denziloe, 1998). It is also important to note that delays in children's development may impact on their ability to play. This may require the adult to adjust his/her interaction strategies and/or provide greater levels of support and perhaps for longer periods of time.

Exceptionally able children also relish in the freedom play offers, and the sense of satisfaction they can gain from pursuing something that is of interest and relevance to them in ways they can control (Dockett and Fler, 2002). However, sometimes the play interests of exceptionally able children may be different to their peers in an ECCE setting. This can result in frustration. Early years practitioners are cautioned against assuming that children are unable to interact appropriately with peers, when they observe them to seek the company of older children to play with, or engage in solitary play (Dockett and Fler, 2002). Rather than assuming that young children who are exceptionally able may not need to play, because their interests appear to be serious or academic, it is important to recognise what can be gained within play experiences. For the exceptionally able child, play may offer the opportunity to test hypotheses, to express and generate creativity, to develop mastery, and to explore complex issues not usually associated with the early childhood years (Dockett and Fler, 2002).

Good early years practice in ECCE requires adults paying attention to both commonalities and similarities within a group as well as acknowledging differences. It is based on an understanding that all children can fulfil their common need and right to play, and ECCE settings have the responsibility of meeting this need and right in different ways, all of which work for and are meaningful for children (van Keulen, 2004).

**Key message**

Children demonstrate a wide range of skills, abilities, knowledge and understanding and all have the right to engage in quality play experiences.

<sup>11</sup> More extensive practical guidelines for making play environments accessible to children with disabilities in ECCE settings are available in Dickins and Denziloe (1998).

## Considering time and space in planning for play

The preceding paragraphs have highlighted how the combined and interacting forces in a child's physical and social environment influence how a child plays (Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005). In this sense, play is not simply the child's world but it is also influenced by what is promoted or constrained by adults, which in turn is influenced by the complexities of the social and cultural worlds that children inhabit. In the context of everyday experiences within ECCE settings, such a conceptualisation of play relates closely to the complex, interconnected and often contested dimensions of time, space and place. Age and changes in the material or biological body increases access to space (Hillman, Adams and Whitelegg, 1990; Newson and Newson, 1976). The rhythms of young children's daily lives, in particular access to time and space, are often dictated by the rhythms of adult's lives, the workplace, and transport systems (Ennew, 1994) and institutional time incorporating regulatory time frames (James, *et al.*, 1998). This includes the temporal flow or rhythms of children's play activities. In this regard, a number of researchers, as well as key policy documents and curricula have emphasised the importance of early years practitioners tuning into and respecting the rhythms of children's play and activity in ECCE settings (Bruce, 1996; David, Gooch, Powell and Abbott, 2002; Moss and Petrie, 2002). This involves providing a predictable, but flexible daily routine; allowing sufficient time for play to develop; protecting time and space so children can return to, repeat and extend play projects; being aware that there are individual differences in children's rhythms of play; and that play may differ in form at different times of the day.

Increasingly, geographical and related perspectives such as architecture and landscape design and environmental psychology are also being applied in designing ECCE settings focussing attention on the design of spaces for children (Burgard, 2000; Dudek, 2001; Greenman, 2005; Gulløv, 2003; National Children's Nurseries Association, 2002). One of the outcomes of this has been both a theoretical and practical interest in the notion of space, 'placeness' and belonging with regard to children's experiences in settings (Liden, 2003; Moss and Petrie, 2002). Aspects of design first highlighted by Montessori and revisited in the Reggio Emilia approach to ECCE include the interconnectedness between the indoors and the outdoors; the importance for children to feel in harmony with the environment outside the school and to be aware of the changes taking place there (Ceppi and Zini, 1998).

Different pedagogical approaches to ECCE for example; High/Scope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Steiner-Waldorf emphasise different aspects of the design of the space and the organisation of resources and materials within the space according to the particular 'vision' of the approach. Whatever the pedagogical orientation being followed, whether the service is home-based, community-based, private or public, it is important that the arrangement of space is in tune with the pedagogical vision of the setting as the closer the match, the higher the quality of the ECCE setting (van Liempd and Hockstra, 2007). Talking about the space can generate discussion about an individual ECCE setting's pedagogical vision. Points of reflection and discussion might include the following (adapted from van Liempd and Hockstra, 2007):

- Is it important for groups of same age children to have a separate secure base/room? What is the desired level of interaction between children of different age groups and how does the space layout facilitate this?
- Are there distinct spaces for different kinds of activities?
- How are different play activity areas connected?
- Can children see other activity areas and move independently from one to another?
- Can children move independently from indoors to outdoors?
- Are there sufficient different play/activity areas indoors and outdoors for the numbers of children keeping in mind children's preference to play in small groups (two to five children)?
- Is there sufficient challenge and diversity in play activities provided indoors and outdoors?
- Are there possibilities for privacy?
- Is there a balance between quiet and 'busy' or noisy areas?
- Is it considered important to be able to bring materials and resources from indoors to the outdoors and from the outdoors indoors and how do the design, layout and resources support this if desired?

- Can children easily find and independently access a wide range of materials and equipment?
- How might boundaries and pathways between play areas support children's play?

The design of an ECCE setting is more than a collection of activity spaces. Colour, natural light, acoustics, aesthetics, furnishing, entrance area, how the children's work and activity is documented and displayed, orientation and connectedness to the community and the surrounding built and natural landscape, all communicate messages about the particular vision of an ECCE setting and need careful consideration from the perspective of all the users of an ECCE: children, parents and early years practitioners (French, 2003; NCNA, 2002; van Liempd and Hoekstra, 2007).

For play to develop and be a satisfying experience, children need to feel safe and secure. Ensuring that spaces where children play are safe is a fundamental principle of good practice in ECCE (French, 2003) and early years practitioners should never lose sight of their responsibilities to always, without exception, assure the safety of the children in their care. A number of writers have pointed to the fact that ECCE settings are however, being constrained by increased regulation of children's play environments where fear of insurance claims, litigation and meeting the requirements of the regulatory authorities appear to be overriding concerns (Adams, 2006; Factor, 2004). Moss (2005) analyses the tendency to increasingly regulate young children's activities within the context of a broader regulatory trend that has become stronger in the last 30 years as the world has come to seem more threatening and competitive, less orderly and controllable. One consequence of the increased emphasis on the avoidance of risk is to limit *the very sorts of experiences long held to be part of a healthy and happy early childhood* (New, Mardell and Robinson, 2005). Meeting children's need for risk is also complicated in settings that cater for children in a wide age range. What may be physically challenging, interesting and risky for a two-year-old, may not provide four-year-olds with sufficiently satisfying or physically challenging experiences.

The principal approach taken seems to be to demonstrate how risk-taking is a developmental necessity i.e. essential to growing up, a natural part of being a child, and related to encountering the unknown, feelings of competency, gaining confidence, and independence (Greenman, 2005; Moorcock, 1998; Smith, 1998; Stephenson, 2003). This further suggests an ethic of responsibility for discerning the risks that children ought to take. The IPPA's publication, *Nurture through nature: promoting outdoor play for young children* (IPPA, 2006) illustrates this powerfully through the 'learning stories' (Carr, 2001) of a range of children attending different kinds of ECCE settings in Ireland. This book also illustrates how effective real and natural materials and inexpensive junk materials can be in play and learning. As noted in the conclusion of the book, it is about 'seeing possibilities' everywhere in the environment (IPPA, 2006, p.60). This applies to children, parents and early years practitioners, as well as architects, town planners and policy makers.

The predominant discourse in ECCE at the beginning of 21st century views children as active participants in their own learning where the importance of a sense of belonging and connectedness to their world is emphasised, and where children and adults co-exist in interdependent relations (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Dunne, 2005; Moss and Petrie, 2002). This marks an important shift in the understanding of the role of the adult in ECCE from passive carer, or reproducer of knowledge to co-constructor of knowledge where adults and children's ongoing interdependent learning and playfulness in daily practice is important. In the final part of the paper, aspects of this interdependent relationship as it may be envisioned in everyday pedagogical play with babies, toddlers and young children are elaborated.

#### Key message

Attention needs to be given to the concepts and experiences of time, space and place as they have an important bearing on the quality of children's play.

## Section 3: A pedagogy of play: strengthening the relationship between play and effective learning and development

This part of the paper is loosely structured according to the three over-lapping age related phases of early childhood identified in the *Framework for Early Learning*: babies (birth to 18 months); toddlers (12 months to three years); young children (two and a half to six years). It also keeps to the fore the four complementary themes that provide a framework for NCCA's conceptualisation of early learning: Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; Exploring and Thinking. Rather than attempting to provide an overview of all possible types of play as they are applicable in each phase of childhood, the paper focuses on raising issues for consideration within the context of selected play content and processes indoors and outdoors to illustrate the relational aspects of play and learning through the lens of the playing-learning child connected to and interdependent with significant adults in their lives.

### Revisiting the role of the adult

As a starting point, let us revisit the person and the work of the early years practitioner as it relates to the key issues arising in Parts 1 and 2 of the paper. In day-to-day practice the professional work of early years practitioners entails: thinking about, planning and engaging in respectful interactions and everyday learning experiences and activities with children; designing and resourcing physical environments, indoors and outdoors; observing children at play; organising time and space for play to develop; evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of the experiences provided in terms of positive outcomes for all children; engaging with families, the community and the wider environment. It is also important to underline the fact that early years practitioners do not operate alone, in a vacuum or in context free situations. ECCE staff quality is nested within larger workforce systems, such as policy and organisational support (Weiss, 2005), teamwork and the provision of time and space for early years practitioners to critically reflect on their own experiences and values (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003). Additionally, as emphasised in the NCCA's consultative document (2004), supportive and trusting relationships between parents and early years practitioners are particularly important in the early years. All of these factors impact on the experience of play and positive outcomes for children.

#### Key message

Adults have an important role in supporting children's play.

### Providing a secure base for babies and toddlers to play and learn

A useful formulation of the play of babies and toddlers utilised by Manning-Morton and Thorp (2003) is in the form of three groups of fundamental questions, which capture babies' and toddlers' motivation to make sense of the world. The first of these relate to the 'Sense of I': *Who am I? How does my body work? Who might I be?* The second group of questions captures the sense of reaching out and interacting with the other: *Who are you?; How are we the same and different?; What can we do together?* The third group invokes babies and toddler's instinctive curiosity and drive to explore their surrounding physical world: *What is it? What does it do? What can I do with it?*

Babies' intrinsic motivation to understand is supported by the physical and emotional availability of trusted and familiar adults. Such a role appears to be more critical at this point in the lifespan than at any other period. Often it is conceptualised as providing a 'secure base' for the playing, exploring baby and toddler. Manning-Morton and Thorp (2003) explain the notion of a 'secure base' in terms of creating *an ambiance that supports the child in their task of integrating their need to feel safe in the protected sphere of intimate relationships with their need for carefree unrestricted exploration* (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003, p. 23). In the early years of life there is a tension between what is old and new or between the security, familiar and

safe, and adventuring outwards to what is novel, or represents freedom, facilitating growth and development and a sense of connectedness and belonging to the world (Nabhan and Trimble, 1994; Tuan, 1977). A key message would seem to be that both are required if babies and toddlers are to thrive.

A further dimension to the adult's role as a 'secure base' as applied in the context of an effective pedagogy of play is the ability to be attuned to babies and toddlers motivation to play. Often this requires adults to be able to 'read' the body language of a baby communicating his/her desire to play, to explore or perhaps his/her need to feel secure. Clearly, play episodes occur throughout the day, and may be embedded in routine caregiving and are often unplanned. A desire to play may be indicated by looking out and pointing, crawling away, climbing, running, jumping, hiding, whilst a need for security may be indicated by searching, reaching up, hugging, clinging, approaching, following (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003)<sup>12</sup>. Tuning into babies' and toddler's perceptions of their world is also about adults engaging or appreciating the 'newness' of childhood experience of the environment (Ward, 1978) and the capacity for sensory experience that is dulled for adults by familiarity (Tuan, 1974).

Given the importance of a 'secure base' in the form of a trusted and emotionally available early years practitioner it is not surprising that the most important piece of play 'equipment' in an ECCE setting is often described as the early years practitioner her/himself (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003; Garner and Bergen, 2006). This is vividly illustrated in the importance of playful face-to-face exchanges of vocalisation between baby and adult, one following the cues of the other, imitating and turn-taking. Babies themselves promote the continuation of playful communication by grins, mouth movements, hand waving and squeals of delight (Lindon, 2001). This kind of play often takes place during not necessarily planned moments throughout the day, typically as the baby sits on the adult's lap, is having his/her nappy changed, or is being dressed (Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2001). Such turn-taking play is highly significant for social interaction and communication at the period in a child's life before verbal skills have developed. Given the opportunity to lie side by side with same aged peers or slightly older babies, young babies have also been demonstrated to engage in early communicative turn-taking behaviours (Goldschmied and Selleck, 1996). Such experiences of imitating and being imitated can also foster babies and toddlers perception of his or her connectedness with the other (Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005).

The classic game of 'Peek-a-boo' initiated and repeated by the adult whereby something disappears and then reappears has also been identified as a key early form of play requiring support and playful involvement and focussed attention of the adult. The significance of this form of play has been variously interpreted as supporting children's developing understanding of object permanence and allowing babies and toddlers to play in a safe way with the scary prospect of their carer disappearing, and having some control over how long the separation lasts (Manning-Morton and Thorp, 2003). Other forms of play where adults and babies operate as play partners include give and take games or point and name games (Garner and Bergen, 2006).

Playful interaction between adult and baby as the baby sits on adult's lap is also an opportunity for early interactive physical play and playing with motion. Many babies enjoy the exciting movement of being lifted in the air, and being swung slowly downwards again. Indeed, the opportunity to move perhaps best captures the essence of play for babies and toddlers. Not to provide opportunities and support for physical play *works against the interests of babies and toddlers and undermines their efforts to explore their world* (Manning-Morton and Thorp, p. 52).

As a general truism, it is possible to say, that when they are non-mobile, babies depend on adults to bring the world to them and them to the world. This also applies for many children with sensory impairments or physical disabilities. In addition to facilitating movement as in the early physical play referred to above, this is also demonstrated in the necessity of adults providing responsive, varied, novel objects and materials within babies reach so that they can explore them with their whole bodies – hand, feet, skin, and mouths. The onus is also on the adult to carefully observe how they use the materials and plan experiences and activities to practise skills and explore ideas further (Goldschmied and Jackson, 1996; Hayes, 2003). Much research

<sup>12</sup> Positive or negative affect visible in facial expressions provide further important clues which can be read by an observant and 'tuned in' adult.

has focussed on the developmental sequence and increasing complexity of play with objects in the first two years of life particularly as it relates to cognitive development such as making inferences based on first hand experience with objects. In the early months of life this sort of play is focussed on the baby's own body when they repeat over and over again motor behaviours that cause interesting things to occur. Then the focus shifts to objects and people external to the body as babies begin to achieve the ability to reach out, bang and grasp objects, let go. This further develops, with the ability to sit upright, to use both hands independently, examine objects and combine action patterns, firstly randomly (e.g. placing a spoon on a truck) and then combine in relational patterns such as 'placing a spoon in a pot, and then placing a lid on top. Once the so named 'pincer grasp' is refined (between 8 and 12 months), a favourite activity is poking fingers into holes, picking up minuscule objects from the floor and using toys they can activate by a poke (Garner and Bergen, 2006).

In recent years there has been renewed interest in babies and toddlers right to experience the outdoors in their daily life in ECCE settings recognising that they can thrive in their encounters with the outdoors. One focus of interest in this regard is the benefits to young children of exposure to air outdoors and exuberant physical activity in terms of their general health and well-being (Penn, 2005). For example, the following are listed amongst the benefits of outdoor play for babies and toddlers in the High/Scope curriculum (French and Murphy, 2005):

- Air temperature changes improve children's ability to adapt to cold and heat.
- Cool and colder air improves appetite and energises people of all ages.
- Exercise and fresh air support children's natural rhythms of sleep and wakefulness.
- Cooler, outdoor air generally contains more moisture and is easier on the body's airways and immune system than drier heated indoor air.
- Outdoor play provides a relaxing alternative to crowded living conditions.

Such an understanding of play outdoors was prominent amongst a range of adults (parents, early years practitioners, pre-school officers) interviewed in Kernan's study of the experience of the outdoors. Being outdoors, or having been outdoors, babies and toddlers were observed to be 'happier' and 'in better form'. Some adults also commented on the relationship between time outdoors and improved appetite and sleeping patterns and greater resilience to illness (Kernan, 2006).

Non-mobile and newly mobile babies whether in home or ECCE settings are dependent on adults to be prepared to take them outdoors, to stay close by and support their interest in natural phenomena. Nature outdoors, filled with interesting things close at hand can be a soothing place of refuge for babies in the company of attentive adults (Nabhan and Trimble, 1994). Also important is adult responsiveness in supporting children's sensorial exploration in their eagerness to understand. In this regard, joint naming is identified as important in attaching significance and meaning to objects and new experiences (David, *et al.*, 2002; Reed, 1996). A different level of contact with the outdoors is possible if babies are carried to a window by an adult where they might jointly point and share interest in a phenomena or object of interest which might be raindrops on the window, a passing dog or police car (David, *et al.*, 2002; Kernan, 2006).

#### Key message

The most important piece of play 'equipment' in an ECCE setting is often described as the early years practitioner her/himself.

## The need to go somewhere, find out how people and things work: the play of toddlers

In her theory of perceptual learning E.J. Gibson proposed that perception underlies knowledge of the world (Gibson and Pick, 2000). As children grow and develop their perceptual learning increasingly reflects a deliberate and organised exploration of the environment. This is hugely facilitated by three gains in movement during the first year of life: 1. postural control - the ability to maintain upright orientation to

environment, 2. locomotion – the ability to manoeuvre through space, 3. manual control – the ability to manipulate objects. Describing the significance of these achievements Gibson and Pick (2000) write: *upright locomotion demands virtuoso control of equilibrium of the whole body and at the same time opens up the world for exploration of its useful offerings and its geography* (p. 48). Noting that while the achievement of locomotion is a significant change in development in itself, Gibson and Pick (p. 103) also remark that *the real excitement belongs to infants themselves* since babies are highly motivated to ‘go somewhere’. By the end of the first year, a great deal of play relates to developing physical and locomotion skills for which babies exhibit great enthusiasm. When they have the opportunities to explore, risk, and try and try again in an environment that is both safe and challenging, babies can engage in motor practice play that leads to advanced physical abilities, mobility, agility, dexterity, and as a result, confidence, independence and learning. Often their growing competence in walking, running and jumping provide the focus for playful activity (Lindon, 2001).

As the developing and growing child’s abilities change with time, so too will the possibilities for action with respect to the environment (Tudge, *et al.*, 1997). Crawling children and toddlers are challenged by variations in terrain; thus the floorscape and small changes of levels in steps and curves are of great interest to these newly mobile children. In this regard, the principles of importance of experience on diverse ground surfaces, as well as slopes and steps, structures for climbing, on, over and under, accessible materials, low windows, and direct access between the indoors and outdoors have been applied in a range of documents outlining good design and pedagogical practice indoors and outdoors for babies and toddlers (Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2001; Manning Morton and Thorp, 2003; High/Scope Educational Foundation, 2003). The play environment for under two’s should provide challenge, and freedom to move and explore. In designing room layouts it is important to consider pathways and boundaries. The provision of clear boundaries between interest areas and clear paths of movement help children focus on play. Boundaries should also be low enough for children to view play possibilities, whilst at the same time have a degree of privacy. Low boundaries also allow adults view the whole area (Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2001).

Stephenson’s observations of children’s outdoor play in a New Zealand full-day early childhood centre revealed a particular passion of one-year olds for outdoor play. She describes how these newly mobile children were particularly determined to be outside where physical challenges such as negotiation of steps, transporting materials, running, managing to make the bike move, climbing into a swing were approached with determination (Stephenson, 1999). Similar interests were observed by Kernan (2006) in her study based in ECCE settings in Dublin. Here too, the one and two year olds enjoyed moving independently between the indoors and outdoors. As well as the experience of being in the outdoor space alone undisturbed by the older children they enjoyed the active involvement of the early years practitioners in playful interactions - throwing, catching and rolling large balls. A key finding of this study was the observation that environments that induced positive affect and interest in children across the early childhood years often had a similar impact on adults. Outdoors, an interdependent relationship was evident where both children and adults benefited in company and interaction with each other. This was particularly apparent when adults were willing to engage in playful, adventurous activity, were in tune with what was fun and interesting for children, and were able to perceive affordances from children’s perspectives (Kernan, 2006).

By the time they are about two years old, toddlers are often described as more physically active than any other time of life and their interest in large motor activities increases. Once mobile, they also encounter objects, places and events as one among many mobile people – with the consequential realisation that others have needs, plans and desires too (Reed, 1996, p. 138). With increasing age, and language abilities toddlers and young children are also more likely to engage in social play with peers. In the following paragraphs we discuss the realm of the social, as experienced in play, with particular attention focussed on pretence, socio-dramatic play and friendships.

#### Key message

As the developing and growing toddler’s abilities change with time, so too will the possibilities for action with respect to the environment, and the play environment for under two’s should provide challenge, and freedom to move and explore.

## Let's pretend: the play of young children

Pretend play, or fantasy play emerges in the second year of life, and it is generally considered to peak between three and five years (Rubin, Fein and Vanderburg, 1983). It has been characterised as being part of a package of symbolic abilities, which include self-awareness, theory of mind and language (Smith, 2006). Unlike other forms of play, it is generally regarded as being uniquely human.

As previously discussed in Parts 1 and 2, socio-dramatic play draws upon children's capacities for constructing meaning, framing stories, and making sense of their worlds in ways that enrich the development of the individual and the group simultaneously. It is viewed as incorporating a broad range of physical, cognitive, social, emotional and moral characteristics as well as including spontaneity and improvisation. The complex learning involved has been identified as incorporating sophisticated social or meta-communicative skills such as language skills, perspective taking, representational thinking, problem solving, turn taking, and the ability to interpret environmental cues, while at the same time retaining an autonomous, child-directed focus (Garvey, 1977; Giffin, 1984; Perry, 2001).

It is important for early years practitioners not to underestimate the importance of such play in terms of social connectivity, children's friendships, and their ability to make and maintain friendships over a period. Much research has demonstrated the centrality of peer relationships and friendships for young children (Dunn, 1993; Paley, 1992). Research has also highlighted the importance of peer play and socio-dramatic play as a key means of supporting the socio-cognitive processes involved in social well-being and adjustment (Dunn, 1993). Interviews with four and five year-old children regarding their experience in ECCE settings in Dublin, suggested that the need for affiliation with their (same sex) peers was hugely important to the children (Kernan, 2006). A major task for these children in the Junior Infant classes was developing the social skills required to be included in play during yard time.

What then, is the role of the early years practitioner in supporting peer relationships, and the complex skills required in maintaining pretend play with others? As previously discussed a number of educators and researchers in the field distinguish between, on the one hand, the provision of indirect scaffolds or supports for play in the environment such as providing adequate space and enough time, and the appropriate kinds and amounts of materials, equipment and play props (Bruce, 1996; Giffin, 1984; Perry, 2001; Jones and Reynolds, 1992; Van Hoorn, *et al.*, 1993) and on the other hand, more direct support involving early years practitioners guiding play enactments, helping elaborating fantasy, helping with access strategies, encouraging creative activities such as telling stories, dancing and singing songs with children, making models, drawings and paintings (Bruce, 1996; Paley, 1992). Socio-dramatic play has also been identified as an important pathway to literacy development. According to Christie (2006) if literacy enriched settings, adequate time and facilitative teacher involvement are in place, socio-dramatic play can function as an ideal medium for children to construct their own knowledge about literacy, since its *'low -risk' atmosphere encourages experimentation with emergent forms of reading and writing* (Christie, 2006, p. 185).

In all cases what is required is that the early years practitioner is a skilled observer, listener and interpreter of the children's play, and respectful of their feelings, intellect, language and culture (Monighan Nourot, 2006; Paley, 2004). The complexity and responsibility involved is captured in the following reflection from Monighan Nourot (2006) regarding early years practitioner influences on sociodramatic play which is termed 'orchestrating' children's play,

*Teachers may well ask themselves if strategies such as providing a well-chosen prop, suggesting an additional role, or helping sustain play by entering the pretend frame will foster a more inclusive play event. Alternatively, establishing a rule such as, "You can't say you can't play," also requires the teacher to be a keen observer and active participant in helping children expand and elaborate their play scripts and in helping to sustain their play. Perhaps there are times when the highly engaged play of one group of children needs to be protected and would-be interlopers guided to create new play events. In each situation, the teacher's understanding of children's histories, the developing peer culture of the classroom, and children's feelings and ideas call for an interpretive stance...the artistry of play orchestration is alive in each moment of its creation.* (Monighan Nourot, 2006, p. 97)

The ECCE setting may represent the first exposure to a public arena for many young children (Dunn, 1993). For children attending crèches, or day nurseries who typically spend longer hours daily in an ECCE setting, than would be typical in a pre-school playgroup or a junior infant classroom, it is also important that early years practitioners respect their right to be alone or in very small groups or pairs. In seeking places to be apart, young children may be dealing with felt crowdedness in a group setting (Greenman, 2005; Olds, 1988). Small spaces, or 'hidey holes' have been conceptualised as being nest like, offering comfort, seclusion or time out (Nabhan and Trimble, 1994), meeting the need 'to see without being seen' (Kirkby, 1989), where children can chose play partners and themes in the private spaces of childhood (Brown and Freeman, 2001). With the support of the early years practitioner, they can be created by toddlers and young children indoors and outdoors by removing themselves alone or in small groups under tables, in cupboards, behind curtains, on platforms, in shrubs, under slides, or in containers such as boxes. Here, they can remove themselves from adult's view while having adults at a secure distance. Importantly, by being supported to create their own hidey-holes or home corners children experience greater ownership of the space. In general, young children prefer small groups and friendship and imaginative play is more common in small groups than in large ones. Therefore, simply providing more adults without limiting group size is unwise (Smith and Connolly, 1980).

The importance of pathways, and boundaries between different kinds of play spaces indoors and outdoors, referred to earlier with respect to toddlers is equally applicable when designing spaces for young children. Spatial and design considerations for supporting play indoors and outdoors referred to earlier also include: consideration of private and group activities; thinking about adjacent areas which permit cross fertilisation of ideas/themes; flexibility e.g. movability of furniture; transformability of materials; providing the possibilities of being 'high up'; making possible the experience of playful experiences in and with nature. Ultimately, the aim is to provide diverse and interesting physical play spaces that are safe, which encourage all children to play, and which allow them freedom to develop their play (Bruce, 1996).

Children do not outgrow the need to negotiate, compromise and co-operate when they leave the ECCE setting behind. The social skills mastered during socio-dramatic play may be generalised to peer interactions in non-play activities, as well as in games with more complex overt rules of behaviour, which become more common in middle childhood. In this respect play serves as an arena in which children can progressively master the social skills they need to experience a positive sense of belonging to their peer group and in so doing, develop their sense of fairness and what makes for 'good' or indeed 'bad' play (Scarlett, *et al.*, 2005). Children now spend less time with adults and more time with same sex peers both at school and in their free time. The balance between freedom and adult control in play also comes to the fore in this age range. As previously noted ideal play spaces are often private spaces, away from the adult gaze, wild and unstructured spaces, away from traffic and bullies, where children may continue to engage in imaginative play. Thus at the transition between early childhood and middle childhood play continues to be a serious behaviour to be respected and nurtured rather than controlled.

**Key message**

It is important for early years practitioners not to underestimate the importance of socio-dramatic play. It draws upon children's capacities for constructing meaning, framing stories, and making sense of their worlds in ways that enrich the development of the individual and the group simultaneously.

## Concluding comments

This paper has raised many issues of consideration when thinking about the place of play in ECCE. It has uncovered the complexity and multi-faceted dimensions of play and learning in the early childhood years. In making play a central part of an ECCE curriculum and an important part of the children's daily experiences, early years practitioners need to be able to articulate the rationale for their decisions in ensuring that all children derive benefit from their play experiences in ECCE settings. Drawing from a broad multi-disciplinary literature, this paper brings together a number of key concepts that serve to illuminate a pedagogy of play in everyday practice. These have relevance for all young children in Ireland in 2007 and all adults who have responsibilities towards children in home and in ECCE settings.

The paper points to the need to raise general awareness regarding the importance of play to children, its potential in supporting young children's well-being, learning and development and to the improvement of the provision of space and time to play indoors and outdoors in ECCE. This necessitates the co-ordination of a number of actions at different levels that encompass adults and the 'adult world' connecting with children's interests, their natural learning strategies and the promotion and actualisation of good design in spaces for children. A useful starting point is to raise awareness amongst the range of adult stakeholders who take decisions on behalf of children to engage with the 'newness' of childhood experience, the capacity and eagerness to explore, and the significance of the sensory experience to children in their response to their surrounding physical environment. This has implications for the training and for continuing professional development of all early years practitioners. One possibility is to encourage such adults to reflect back on their own childhood experience of play. A second important approach is to pay attention to observing how young children use the indoor and outdoor environment, how they perceive it, engage with it, and to listen to children regarding the value and meaning they put on their play experiences. An interdisciplinary approach in considering the role of play in young children's lives within initial training and continuing professional development in ECCE is also recommended. This will serve to ensure better understanding regarding the significance of play to children's general well-being, and the multitude of factors impacting on children's ability to carve out a satisfying play life. It will also help prepare early years practitioners for their advocacy role in ensuring equity in play opportunities. Ongoing, mentoring and 'expert' support is also required in supporting individual practicing early years practitioners and staff groups to reflect on, and improve pedagogical practices in relation to play for all children.

Improving access to, designing and organising indoor-outdoor ECCE play spaces which engage and interest all young children, requires collaborative effort between early years practitioners, children, parents and other 'stakeholders' such as regulators, school management boards/committees, urban planners, architects and landscape designers. A recent strategy to promote good design in spaces for children in the Netherlands was the organisation of competitions in architecture in ECCE. It is recommended that ECCE organisations and County Childcare Committees consider a similar strategy. Additionally, it is recommended that design workshops are made available involving collaborative input from a range of disciplinary, and professional perspectives, which address planning, designing and evaluating spaces for children, as well as strategies for including the perspectives of children, parents and communities.

Finally, it is important to underline the responsibility of national and local government to guarantee the material conditions so that young children's entitlements to 'good' play are a reality.

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National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)



# Aistear

Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige  
The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

**Play as a context for early learning  
and development: A research paper**

**Executive Summary**

# **Play as a context for early learning and development: A research paper**

## **Executive Summary**

By Margaret Kernan, PhD

Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA.

# Play as a context for early learning and development

## An executive summary

The image of the child presented in the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's (NCCA) consultative document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (2004) is that of a capable and active learner. Supporting this image is the identification of play and relationships as the two primary contexts for learning. By viewing early learning through the 'relationships lens', the Framework emphasises the highly interactive and social nature of learning. The question arises regarding the specific understanding of, and role of play, within such a vision for learning in the early years.

The paper *Play as a context for early learning and development* addresses the relationship between play, development and learning with the ultimate aim of elaborating on the place of play in the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>1</sup> being developed by the NCCA. In this respect, 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' that has relevance for children in the diversity of early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings in Ireland, and across the broad age range of early childhood from birth to six years.

## Understandings of play in early childhood

The key points arising in Section 1 of the paper, *Understandings of play in early childhood: children's and adults' perspectives* can be summarised as follows.

- Play is highly significant to all children in their everyday lives at home and in ECCE settings.
- An understanding of play as a fundamental need and right of all children and central to their well-being offers a powerful construct with which to legitimise and secure the place of play in ECCE.
- The most significant characteristics and dispositions of play in early childhood include: play's voluntary nature; its meaningfulness to the players; its low risk; its spontaneity and openness to the surrounding world; its symbolism; its ability to deeply involve and sustain children's concentration; its activity, sociability, joy, and sense of fun.
- There is considerable variation in understandings of play in ECCE across different contexts. This stems from historical and cultural traditions and values, dominant political concerns and broad discourses concerning childhood, learning, care, education, and power relationships between adults and children in ECCE settings.
- Adults have an important and active role in supporting children's play. The precise nature of their involvement can be viewed as a continuum between indirect planning for play to direct involvement in the play.
- There is a tension in current ECCE in Ireland between the vision/theory of play and children's everyday play experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

## Theorising play in early childhood

The key points arising in Section 2 of the paper, *Theorising play in early childhood* can be summarised as follows.

- Research in human development indicates that play encompasses an important role in the all round development and learning of children.
- The following types of play are considered the most salient forms of play with respect to children's holistic development during the early childhood years: exploratory play, constructive play, creative play, pretend, fantasy and socio-dramatic play, physical, locomotor play, and language and word play.
- The form and focus of play is influenced both by children's development and the socio-cultural and ecological context in which play and development take place. These factors interact with each other.
- A diversity and equity approach to play in ECCE is based on the principles of inclusiveness - everyone belongs, everyone has an equal right to play, and the origins and value of all are appreciated and respected. Thus attention is paid to both the commonalities and differences in play.
- It is important that the organisation of time and space is in tune with the pedagogical vision of an ECCE setting. Factors such as being aware of and respecting children's rhythms of play, and being aware of how the design of the physical space and available affordances can effect how play develops, are important considerations in both home and ECCE settings.
- Children need to feel safe and secure when they play. However, it is important that adults balance children's need for safety with the recognition that risk-taking and challenge are developmental necessities and are important for children's well-being.

## A pedagogy of play

The key points arising in Section 3 of the paper, *A pedagogy of play: strengthening the relationship between play and effective learning and development* can be summarised as follows.

- Key aspects of the early years practitioner's role in supporting the play of babies and young toddlers include providing a secure physical and emotional base and being responsive to children's motivation to play and explore.
- A great deal of the play of toddlers relates to their developing physical and locomotion skills for which they exhibit great enthusiasm. Therefore, the play environment should provide challenge and freedom to move on diverse floor-areas, indoors and outdoors.
- Pretend and socio-dramatic play are important parts of the play of young children and are significant in their friendships. In order to support children's pretend play adults need to be skilled observers, listeners and interpreters of the children's play, and are respectful of their feelings, intellect, language, culture, and right to privacy.
- Opportunities for hands-on experiences are important for children's development.
- Design considerations such as the provision of small spaces, den-making materials, pathways and boundaries are key elements in providing for opportunities for solitary, private, small group, and larger group play.
- Play and hands-on experiences continue to be of significance to children at the transition between early and middle childhood.



## Conclusion

In conclusion the paper raises many issues of consideration when thinking about the place of play in ECCE. It uncovers the complexity and multi-faceted dimensions of play and learning in the early childhood years. In making play a central part of the curriculum and an important part of the children's daily experiences, early years practitioners need to be able to articulate the rationale for their decisions in ensuring that all children derive benefit from their play experiences in ECCE settings. Drawing from a broad multi-disciplinary literature, the paper brings together a number of key concepts that serve to illuminate a pedagogy of play in everyday practice. These have relevance for all children in Ireland and are also relevant to all adults who have responsibilities towards children in their homes and in ECCE settings.



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National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)



# Aistear

*Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige*  
*The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*



**Supporting early learning  
and development through  
formative assessment**

**A research paper**

# **Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment**

**A research paper**

Elizabeth Dunphy, EdD

Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA



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## Glossary

**Agency:** Children are active in their own learning. Some ways in which they display their agency is by taking the initiative in learning situations, by observing and becoming involved in ongoing events, or by initiating conversations with others.

**Authentic assessment:** Assessing children on tasks that are part of their ordinary everyday experiences in their early education and care settings.

**Co-construction:** This occurs when children and/or practitioners construct meaning and knowledge about the world together in interaction.

**Collaborative learning:** This is learning that takes place in social contexts and using the resources of the environment.

**Formative assessment:** This is assessment that informs teaching and learning. It is concerned with the short-term collection and use of evidence for the guidance of learning.

**Intersubjectivity:** This is the mutual understanding achieved by people in communication.

**Meta-cognition:** This refers to what children think about their own learning, thinking and remembering and how the act of thinking about these processes affect the ways in which children then go about intentionally learning, thinking and remembering. It is a process whereby children become aware of their own thought processes.

**Pedagogy of mutuality:** This perspective recognises that both child and adult bring beliefs and ideas to the learning situation and that discussion and interaction are the means by which a shared frame of reference is established. This results in an exchange of understandings between the child and the practitioner.

**Pedagogical content knowledge:** This is a form of professional understanding which brings together content knowledge and knowledge about pedagogy. It is based on an understanding of how best to organise and present ideas and adapt them in response to the diverse interests and abilities of children.

**Performance assessment:** Assessing children's early learning and development through observing, recording, and evaluating children's performance or work.

**Scaffolding:** This refers to the practice of providing guidance and support to children as they move from one level of competence to another. It is a metaphor that is used to describe interactional support for children's efforts. The assistance offered to the child is sensitive to and contingent on the amount of support needed.

**Schema:** These are patterns of early repeatable behaviours which children engage in and which lead them through a process of co-ordination, to make generalisations.

**Socio-cultural theories:** These are a family of theories that have arisen from the work of Vygotsky and which have in common their emphasis on the role that social and cultural factors play in children's development and learning.

**Theory of mind:** Children gradually acquire the understanding that other people can hold beliefs about the world that differ from what the child him/herself believes or appears to be true.

**Transformation of participation:** From a socio-cultural perspective, children are seen as developing through a process of participating in activities of their communities, and in doing so their participation changes. They become progressively more expert through engagement in cultural practice and through social interactions that guide them in taking on new roles and responsibilities.

## Introduction

This research paper, *Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment* responds to the questions – *What’s the purpose of formative assessment in early childhood? What should we assess? How should we assess?* The paper is one of four research papers commissioned by the NCCA to set out the theory trail behind the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>1</sup>. This paper is being used to develop guidelines on assessment for inclusion in the *Framework*. While there are a number of different types and functions of assessment this paper focuses on formative assessment as this offers most potential in terms of assessing to support learning in the day-to-day interactions between adults and children in early childhood.

Section 1 of the paper, General background explores the meaning of assessment and its relationship with teaching and learning. Though still very much an emerging area, what we know about how to support early learning and development through the formative assessment process has advanced somewhat in recent years. In many ways the advances in assessment practices in early childhood education and care mirror those in the field of assessment generally. In particular, the articulation of the interrelatedness between teaching, learning and assessment and the complexity of the relationships between these processes and curriculum is of as much importance to those concerned with early learning and development, as it is to those concerned with later stages of development.

The term assessment, as applied in early childhood education and care, generally implies the intention to provide a rich picture of the ways in which children act, think and learn. In order to orient the discussion about assessment in early childhood education and care, the initial section of the paper outlines the general context in relation to the assessment of early learning and development. While a number of different reasons for assessing early learning and development can be identified, this paper focuses on using formative assessment to support teaching and learning.

Section 2, *The nature of early learning* begins from the premise that in assessing early learning and development it is critical to acknowledge and take account of the nature of early learning and development. We know that in early childhood learning and development is rapid, episodic and holistic. It is also highly influenced by the extent of support that is available for that learning. The adults around the child, and the extent to which they can and do support early learning and development, are crucial elements in determining the extent of learning. Because of their stage of development, children’s abilities in some areas are not yet mature. Their verbal abilities are still emerging, and so assessment of learning and development is often through observation of, and inference from, the children’s actions and reactions in particular situations. It is also essential to acknowledge and take account of the fact that there are considerable cultural variations in children’s experiences. These will result in differences in the course and content of early learning and development. They may also result in considerable differences in how children learn and in how they display their learning.

It is important to focus on the breadth of children’s early learning and development. Section 3, *What to assess in early learning* focuses on assessing children’s dispositions, well-being, cognitive abilities and self-concept and sociability.

Assessment in early childhood is shaped by how children from birth to six years learn and develop. A narrative approach offers great potential for making assessment of early learning visible. Documentation of evidence of early learning and development in various ways, using a variety of media and tools, is important for both reflecting on and communicating about children’s achievements. There appears to be general agreement that assessment of early learning and development should be informal, carried out over time, and in the context of the child’s interactions with materials, objects and other people. It should also be authentic in the sense that it should take place in real-life contexts where it is embedded in tasks that children see as significant, meaningful and worthwhile. Informal assessments, carried out as children engage in experiences they see as relevant and meaningful, are likely to produce the best assessments of early learning and development. These issues are considered in Section 4, *How to assess early learning*.

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<sup>1</sup> The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.



Section 5, *Assessment and the practitioner* discusses the need for professional development for early childhood practitioners. Good assessment practice requires understanding about how children learn and develop, the process of assessment, and skills to manageably assess in ways that respect children and that are ethically sound.

The concluding comments clarify and summarise the key messages across the paper. Key points arising from the discussion are presented in shaded boxes throughout the paper. Some of these points relate to key messages arising from theory and research while others are aspirational.

## Section 1: General background

This section of the paper explores what is meant by assessment in early childhood and discusses its relationship with teaching and learning. Informed by this, a definition of formative assessment is presented. The section concludes by describing the current practice and legislative context in which assessment takes place in Ireland.

### Purpose of the paper

The purpose of this paper is to review issues related to formative assessment of early learning. The findings of the paper will be used to support the development of the assessment guidelines in the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>2</sup>. The paper responds to questions related to the *what*, *why* and *how* of formative assessment in early childhood.

### Assessment and curriculum

Ways of assessing children's learning and development cannot be separated from features of the curriculum (for example, the degree of formality or informality that characterises it), and from views of learners and learning which are embodied in that curriculum. Kelly (1992) identifies the interrelating of curriculum and assessment as ... *a highly complex and sophisticated matter* (p. 16). He argues that the interplay of one with the other is crucial in determining the effectiveness of either. The NCCA is developing a curriculum framework for children between the ages of birth and six years. The Framework embraces a particular view of the child, of learning and of how that learning may be celebrated and extended. In the *Framework for Early Learning*, learning is presented in four broad and complementary themes:

- Well-being
- Identity and Belonging
- Communicating
- Exploring and Thinking.

Some of the principles related to how children develop and learn which underpin the Framework include the following:

- holistic learning and development
- active learning
- play and first-hand experiences
- relevant and meaningful experiences
- communication and language
- a well-planned and well-resourced outdoor and indoor learning environment.

It will be important to identify an approach to assessment that will help practitioners identify and support children's learning as it relates to the Framework's principles and themes. Assessment and teaching are now generally considered to be as much inseparable processes in early childhood as they are in any other period of life (Shepard, Kagan and Wurtz, 1998; Bowman *et al.*, 2001). We now know that children learn by building new understandings on those that they already have (Wood, 1998). In order to support children's learning then, practitioners first collect information about children's well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploration and thinking. What children engage with, think, know, feel or can do are all of importance in the assessment process. Reflection on this information helps the practitioner to establish

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<sup>2</sup> As noted earlier, the *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

how best to advance children's learning and development. Once this is established the practitioner is then in a position to plan worthwhile, interesting and challenging learning experiences to further progress learning. Clearly then, assessment in early childhood is not something that can be considered independent of either curriculum or learning.

It is critical that the assessment of early learning recognises the unique nature of development in early childhood. It is also critical that we learn from the experiences of countries with a longer history of appraising assessment practices and processes than we have here in Ireland. Working in the context of the United States, where there has been considerable interest in finding appropriate assessment formats for use by early childhood practitioners, Shepard *et al.* (1998, pp. 8-9) devised a set of principles to guide practice and policy for the assessment of children's learning. These represented a synthesis of understandings in respect of the most appropriate approaches to assessment in early childhood and the authors advised that they should apply to any situation in which assessments are used to make decisions about children's learning:

- Assessments should bring about benefits for children.
- Assessments should be tailored to a specific purpose and should be reliable, valid and fair for that purpose.
- Assessment policies should be designed recognising that reliability and validity of assessments increases with children's age.
- Assessments should be age-appropriate in both content and the method of data collection.
- Assessments should be linguistically appropriate, recognising that to some extent all assessments are measures of language.
- Parents should be a valued source of assessment information, as well as an audience for assessment results.

## **The Irish context**

### **The practice context**

Assessment in the early years of a child's life can be viewed from a number of perspectives. David (2003) identifies three perspectives

- the day-to-day informal assessments made by the adults with whom the child comes in contact. In most cases these are early years practitioners who may or may not document such assessments.
- the physical assessments by paediatricians, public health nurses and family doctors. These aim to identify any physical problems that may impede children's progression and seek to alleviate them as much as possible.
- diagnostic assessments that can have a range of functions, including identifying children with special educational needs, and helping practitioners to support their learning more effectively.

No single type of assessment can serve all of the purposes identified in the perspectives outlined above. Each perspective has a role to play, especially in the case of children with special needs where diagnostic assessments are of paramount importance. Babies, toddlers and young children may experience various types of assessments in early childhood. Some may occur frequently, others occasionally. Multi-agency and multi-disciplinary communication is a critical means by which information related to the child's development and learning can be shared for the benefit of the child. It is imperative that practitioners in early childhood settings have access to any information that is of use in making sure learning opportunities in the setting are appropriate for each individual child. The practice of practitioners building on assessments carried out by other professionals such as therapists can be facilitated by significant levels of inter- and/or multi-disciplinary teamwork.

Where children spend some or all of their day in out-of-home settings the practitioners with whom they are in contact engage in ongoing assessment for supporting learning and development. Traditionally, observation is the primary method used in assessing children's learning and development in the range of early education settings in Ireland. For instance, close observations of children's play in a range of childcare services in Ireland provide the basis for learning and teaching stories (Brennan, 2004). Many practitioners use checklists to record aspects of their observations. These are often used to record observations in relation to the assessment of children's skills and understandings, particularly in the area of identifying children with special educational needs and in supporting their learning and development. In relation to their use of assessment practices to support children's learning in curriculum areas, only about half of infant teachers who participated in Phase 1 of the Primary Curriculum Review (NCCA, 2005) reported that they used observation and about three-quarters reported using documentation. Infant teachers in primary schools also use a range of developmental and diagnostic assessments, for example, in the area of early literacy, to assess specific aspects of children's development and learning. (See Section 4 for a more extensive discussion on observation as an assessment method.)

Increasingly there is an awareness that children live different childhoods: their social, cultural, linguistic and ecological experiences and opportunities differ and all of this influences assessment. Practitioners who are in daily contact with children are in a good position to familiarise themselves with these diverse aspects of children's lives and of their possibilities for early learning and development. Consequently, on a day-to-day basis, the practitioner's own assessments are the ones that have the most potential in terms of planning for children's learning and of making judgements regarding children's progress. Using assessment for this purpose is the central focus of this paper.

#### Key point

A range of assessments are appropriate in assessing children's learning. The focus of the assessment depends on its purpose. The central focus of this paper is on formative assessment where practitioners' own assessments are used to support and plan for children's learning.

### The legislative context

There is a long history of informal assessment of children's learning in Ireland. However, for various reasons early childhood practitioners now find it necessary to document learning in ways that were not general practice previously. Both legislative requirements and practitioners' own desires to better understand early learning and how best to extend it, are to the fore in encouraging the documentation of information related to children's early learning and development.

In relation to young children attending primary schools, **The Education Act** (Department of Education and Science, 1998) requires principals and teachers *to regularly evaluate students and periodically report the results of the evaluation to the students and their parents*. The implications of this requirement for teachers and schools include

- *developing assessment **procedures** which provide an accurate account of children's progress and achievement*
- *creating and maintaining **records** of children's progress and achievement while they are attending the school*
- *providing parents with assessment **reports** which contain accurate and clearly accessible information about their children's progress and achievement*

(NCCA, 2007a, p. 95).

**The Equal Status Act** (The Equality Authority, 2000) has implications for the assessment policy in early education settings. In particular, it requires settings to be aware of the **effects of context, culture and language** in assessing children's learning and development.

**The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act (EPSEN)** (Department of Health and Children, 2004) requires that where a **child has or may have special educational needs an assessment of those needs should be carried out**. With children not attending formal schooling this is the responsibility of the relevant health board. Where the child is a student then the Act requires schools to identify when a child is not benefiting from the education programme on offer and to investigate the reasons behind this. The school, or in the case of a child not at school the relevant health board, is mandated to ensure that an **individual education plan (IEP)** for an appropriate education for the child is drawn up in consultation with the child's parents. The Act outlines the **statutory requirements for educational planning** for children with special educational needs (SEN). It requires that a multi-disciplinary assessment be carried out in situations where it is considered that the child may have special educational needs. An IEP must then be prepared for each child identified as having such needs. Discussion and agreement regarding the abilities, skills and talents as well as the nature and degree of the child's special educational needs, together with an analysis of how these needs affect the child's learning and development is required. The plan must include these and must also specify goals for learning and development for the child over a period not exceeding one year. It must also specify the supports that need to be put in place to enable the child to participate in and benefit from education.

**The Disability Act** (Department of Health and Children, 2005) **enables provision for the assessment of health and education needs for persons with disabilities, arising from their situation**. The Act provides for access for people with disabilities to health and education services. In relation to educational needs, Part 2 Section 8 (9) states that where an assessment is applied for it must be carried out by or at the request of an assessment officer who then

...identifies the need for the provision of an educational service to the child, he or she shall, in case the child is enrolled in a school, refer the matter to the principal of that school...in any other case, refer the matter to the council for the purposes of an assessment.

**The Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No 2) Regulations** (Department of Health and Children, 2006) set out the **regulations and requirements pertaining to all aspects of the operation of pre-school settings**. Regulation 5 explicitly requires that:

A person carrying on a pre-school service shall ensure that each child's learning, development and well-being is facilitated within the daily life of the service through the provision of the appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interaction, materials and equipment, having regard to the age and state of development of the child and the child's cultural context.

To fulfil this requirement it is necessary for practitioners to engage in making important judgements about children's learning and development and how best to extend and enrich it. By implication this involves the practitioner in assessing learning and development. Indeed, the explanatory guide directs practitioners to *be pro-active in ensuring that appropriate action is taken to address each child's individual needs with his/her parents and following consultation, where appropriate, with other relevant services* (p. 39).

While there are other pieces of legislation which impact on aspects of assessment such as the transfer of assessment information between settings, the focus of this paper is on the actual process of using assessment to support early learning and development. How best to comply with the above demands in ways that are respectful to children; capture the complexity of early learning; and are helpful in planning future learning experiences has now become a key issue for consideration for early childhood practitioners.

#### Key point

Assessment takes place within a particular legislative framework in Ireland.

## Ethical Issues

The nature of the power relations between babies, toddlers and young children and the practitioners with whom they come into contact needs to be acknowledged in the assessment situation. The power of the adult and the relative dependency of children make it imperative that ethical issues are given serious consideration by practitioners. Some of these issues are discussed later in Section 5.

## Towards a definition of formative assessment

Bowman, Donovan and Burns (2001) suggest that the term assessment, as applied in early childhood education and care, generally implies the intention to provide a rich picture of the ways in which children act, think and learn. Such a picture focuses on the individual's learning, is built up over time and provides evidence of learning in a number of different contexts. In relation to its importance, they argue that:

*Assessment has an important role to play in revealing a child's prior knowledge, development of concepts and ways of interacting with and understanding the world so that teachers can choose a pedagogical approach and curricular materials that will support the child's further learning and development.* (p. 259)

Pelligrini (1998) describes assessment in early childhood as being about the collection of information about children. This is generally understood to encompass a number of other processes besides collecting. For example, Lally and Hurst (1992) describe how assessment also involves practitioners in documenting, analysing and reflecting on the information collected, and using this to plan and support further learning.

This definition is very similar to that used in *Assessment in the Primary School Curriculum: Guidelines for Schools* (NCCA, 2007a). While similar methods may be useful in both early childhood settings and in primary school settings, in early childhood assessment particular account needs to be taken of the characteristics of babies, toddlers and young children and to the unique ways in which these children learn. Early childhood assessment focuses specifically on finding out what children are interested in, understand, think, feel, and are able to do. It seeks to document this information in order to understand children's thinking and learning styles, to chart children's progress and to support further learning. It is developmental in that it focuses on processes rather than on content or product.

### Key point

Assessment of early learning provides a rich picture of children's learning by collecting and documenting information. Through reflecting on and using this information, children's future learning is supported and enhanced.

## Supporting learning and development

Assessment in early childhood has been identified as having a number of functions - ipsative, diagnostic, summative, evaluative and informative (Wood and Attfield, 2005). Assessment in early childhood has enormous potential to support learning and development. A recent large-scale longitudinal study of early learning settings in England confirmed the importance of assessment in meeting children's needs and in supporting their cognitive progress (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). The ultimate purpose of assessment in early childhood is to make learning more interesting, enjoyable and successful for children. Drummond (1993) suggests that assessment must work for children:

*We can use our assessments to shape and enrich our curriculum, our interactions, our provision as a whole: we can use our assessments as a way of identifying what children will be able to learn next, so that we can support and extend that learning. Assessment is part of our daily practice in striving for quality.* (p. 13)

### Key point

Assessment in early childhood promotes the extension and enrichment of children's early learning and development.

The following section looks at the nature of early learning and the implications for assessing early learning.

## Section 2: The nature of early learning

This section of the paper discusses the characteristics of early learning and identifies some key theoretical constructs that guide the teaching, learning and assessment processes during early childhood. Theoretical considerations have been influential in shaping new and emerging approaches to assessment and the most salient of these are discussed in relation to their implications for the assessment of early learning and development.

### Characteristics of early learning

During the early childhood period children's learning across the various dimensions of development (for example, physical, motor, linguistic, emotional) is greater than at any other period, but is also highly variable across the dimensions. It also occurs very rapidly, is episodic in nature and is very susceptible to environmental conditions (Shepard *et al.*, 1998). These factors contribute to making the assessment of early learning and development very challenging.

### The complexity of early learning

We have a great deal of evidence that early learning and development is both extensive and complex (e.g. Drummond, 1993; Bowman *et al.*, 2001; Carr, 2002). The research paper, *Children's early learning and development* (French, 2007) provides information on many facets of early learning and development. Early childhood educators have consistently sought to convey the extent of this complexity and over the years they have provided evidence of exactly how much learning children can demonstrate, provided that it is approached in appropriate ways. For instance, Donaldson (1983) clearly demonstrates how children display different levels of proficiency/learning in different contexts. In her seminal work, *Children's Minds*, she reviewed research that illustrated the dramatic effect of the inclusion or omission of a single adjective in questioning children on so-called 'logical' tasks. She argues (p. 59) that the young child ... *first makes sense of situations (and perhaps especially those involving human intentions) and then uses this kind of understanding to help him make sense of what is said to him.* Looking not at what children say but at what they do, the work of Athey (1990) and that of Nutbrown (1999) clearly demonstrates how, as children pursue certain schema for considerable periods of time, these can be identified and supported by practitioners. Early learning is seen, for instance in Athey's work, to have its own recognisable and valid characteristics. Nutbrown (1999) draws out the implication of that work for the assessment of children's pathways and patterns of development and interest. This work along with that of Drummond (1993) exemplifies vividly how much of children's learning there is to see if practitioners are open to seeing it by looking beyond what children can tell us and instead observing what they actually can do. Play provides an important vehicle and context for this work.

#### Key point

During the early childhood period, children's learning is highly complex and is made visible through assessing carefully and thoughtfully.

### Key theoretical constructs for assessment

Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) observe that in recent years, especially in Western Europe, there has been a process of rethinking childhood that has led to new constructions of the child. They locate this process in a number of interrelated developments with respect to learning theories; philosophy; psychology; sociology; and a concurrent questioning of previous understandings in these fields. From this post-modern perspective, the young child is seen, from the start of life, as a construction of his or her own world. This is very similar to the perspective adopted by Malaguzzi (1993), the founder of the world-renowned Reggio Emilia pre-schools in Italy. Dahlberg *et al.* (1999) describe how in Reggio Emilia pre-schools, the young child is understood as a unique, complex individual who is rich in the sense that he or she is equipped from the start to engage fully and actively in their world. A wider discussion of these perspectives follows.

## Ecological perspectives

Ecological and socio-cultural theories of learning have largely dominated explanations of development and learning in early childhood in recent years. For instance, ecological (Bronfenbrenner 1979) and bio-ecological (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998) models of human development have been influential in efforts to understand learning and development and associated processes such as assessment. These models emphasise the role in human development of both the environment and of processes. The research paper, *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care* (Hayes, 2007) in turn highlights both the importance of care and education in facilitating children's overall development. From this perspective, human development is seen as taking place as a result of *progressively more complex reciprocal interactions* (p. 996) between the young child and the people, objects and symbols in the environment. *To be effective the interactions must occur on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time* (p. 996). These enduring forms of interaction (proximal processes) are seen as key to learning and development and we must study these interactions over time and alongside the observation of behaviour in natural settings. From an ecological-theory perspective, Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes how the learner can participate in increasingly more complex learning situations and in doing so take increasingly greater responsibility in the learning situation. The perspective also emphasises the agency or active nature of children in their interactions with adults, objects and symbols. The model can be used to draw attention to the interpersonal and situational aspects of assessment, for example: the importance of the personal characteristics of the child and the adult in the assessment context, the importance of reciprocal interactions between child and adult and the importance of assessing children's level of engagement with the objects and symbols provided in the immediate environment. Thus the ecological approach emphasises assessment of children engaged in real tasks in natural settings. This perspective sits very well with the socio-cultural perspective that we look at next.

## Socio-cultural perspectives

In the past two decades socio-cultural perspectives, that is perspectives that highlight the social and cultural nature of learning, are increasingly used to explain the ways that learning and development occur in early childhood (Anning, Cullen and Fler, 2004). Socio-cultural theories of learning suggest that the process of learning is as much a social construction as it is an individual one. Rogoff (1998, p. 691) describes development as *transformation of participation*. Transformation occurs at a number of levels: for instance, the learner changes at the level of their involvement, in the role they play in the learning situation, in the ability they demonstrate in moving flexibly from one learning context to another, and in the amount of responsibility taken in the situation. Activity theory also concentrates on the social aspects of learning.

## Activity theory

Activity theory, which is a development of aspects of Vygotsky's work (See for example, Engerstrom *et al.*, 1999), is also being highlighted as a theoretical framework that may be useful in explaining the complexity of learning-related issues in early childhood. Fler, Anning and Cullen (2004) explain how activity theory, in common with Rogoff's discussion of socio-cultural theory, focuses on the study of the complexity of human behaviour in social groups and in specific contexts. The theory is premised on the notion that *the contextual features of a task contribute to ... performance on that task* (p. 178). Furthermore, children use tools such as language, a particular action or resource to mediate knowledge in interactions with others. But the cultural features of the context in which they use these tools influences the way activities are performed and understood.

### Key point

If socio-cultural theory informs our understanding of how children learn, it also by implication informs our understanding of assessment.

What all of these perspectives hold in common is their emphasis on the socially constructed nature of learning and of assessment. There are a number of other important constructs that also unite them to greater or lesser degrees. These include children's agency, the importance of collaboration, and the co-construction of meaning and knowledge. These constructs are particularly helpful when thinking about the quality of the interactions between practitioners and young learners. Quality interactions are increasingly recognised as central to pedagogy (Black and Wiliam 1998a; Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). The next sub-section discusses these ideas in some detail, and in doing so, draws out the implications for assessment practices in early childhood.

### Children's agency

Bruner (1999a) argues that advances in the study of human development provide us with a profile of the child as an active, intentional being; with knowledge as 'man-made' rather than simply there; with ways to negotiate with others in the construction of knowledge. (See French (2007) for more detailed information.) A crucial aspect of identity and self-esteem is that the child sees him/her self as an agent in control of his/her own actions. Some ways in which children display their agency is by taking the initiative in learning situations, by observing and becoming involved in ongoing events, or by initiating conversations with others. Agency is about taking more control of your own mental activity (Bruner, 1996, p. 87). Bruner argues that the agentive mind is not only active in nature but it seeks out dialogue and discourse with other active minds (p. 93). Bruner (1999a) identifies efforts to recognise children's perspectives in the processes of learning as highly significant and he uses the term pedagogy of mutuality (p. 13) to describe the pedagogy that arises from such endeavours. It is premised on the belief that children are able to reason; to make sense (both alone and in discourse with others); to reflect and to hold theories about self and about the world. The practitioner, according to Bruner (p. 12) is concerned with understanding what the child thinks and how he/she arrives at what he/she believes. He identifies four key research constructs which have enriched this perspective on teaching and learning (and by implication assessment):

- Intersubjectivity - how the child develops the ability to read other minds
- Theory of mind - the child's grasp of another's intentional state
- Meta-cognition - what the child thinks about learning, remembering thinking
- Collaborative learning - how children, through talk and discussion, explain and revise their thinking.

These theoretical ideas are important also in the analysis of assessment as it relates to early learning and development. Children's collaboration in learning is also important and this is considered below.

#### Key point

The active role which children themselves play in their interactions with others needs to be recognised and taken into account in any assessment of learning.

### Children's collaboration in learning

#### Zone of proximal development

Vygotsky's theory of learning (1978; 1986) has been highly influential in helping to explain the processes of learning in early childhood. In particular, his notion of the *zone of proximal development* has provided the foundation and potential for some of the most important recent initiatives in the assessment of individual children's learning (Lunt, 2000). Berk and Winsler (1995) describe Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) as

*a dynamic zone of sensitivity in which learning and cognitive development occur. Tasks that children cannot do individually but they can do with help from others invoke mental functioning that are currently in the process of developing, rather than those that have already matured (p. 26).*

It appears that Vygotsky originally introduced the ZPD in the context of arguing against intelligence testing which he felt was seeking to assess something static and did not reflect the dynamic and ever-changing

nature of human cognition. Adult-child collaboration within the ZPD is critical for effective teaching and learning interactions because it is within such interactions that the practitioner identifies how the child may be assisted in learning and what the child is capable of doing with appropriate support. The practitioner also has the opportunity to assess the impact of such support on the child's progress. This approach to assessment effectively merges the teaching and assessment processes. It is commonly referred to as dynamic assessment. When Feuerstein (1979) first proposed this form of assessment he was envisioning, in essence, a joint problem-solving situation during which the practitioner gauges the nature and extent of assistance required by the child in order to solve the problem. Children's responsiveness to appropriate instructional interactions is a key factor in dynamic assessment situations and it is now considered to be an important predictor of learning potential (Berk and Winsler, 1995). Lidz (1991) emphasises that:

*The focus of dynamic assessment is on the assessor's ability to discover the means of facilitating the learning of the child, not on the child's demonstration of ability to the assessor (as cited in Berk and Winsler, 1995, p. 139).*

Dynamic assessment is considered by Berk and Winsler (ibid.) as especially useful for making visible the learning potential of those children whose early experiences do not include experiences that prepare them for learning in group/institutional settings. (For a comprehensive discussion of dynamic assessment and emerging approaches to such assessment, see Lunt, 2000). The concept of scaffolding is often associated with ZPD and it is this which we turn our attention to next.

#### Key point

Practitioner's interactions with children often incorporate both teaching and assessment. It is critical that the practitioner is capable of engaging certain interactive skills in such situations since these will be necessary to ensure optimal learning and development.

#### Scaffolding

Effective *scaffolding* (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976), where the adult guides the child's learning in the ZPD, is an important feature of the engagement of the child in joint problem solving. Here, the child interacts with the practitioner while the two are jointly trying to reach a goal and this results in the establishment of *intersubjectivity* (Newson and Newson, 1975). Intersubjectivity refers to the process whereby two participants achieve a shared understanding whilst undertaking a task that they approach from different perspectives. The parties co-construct meanings in activities that involve higher-order thinking (Vygotsky, 1978).

Rogoff (1998) emphasises the ongoing mutual process of understanding, which is inherent in joint problem-solving interactions. She also draws attention to the institutional and cultural aspects of joint problem-solving activities. She distinguishes between her socio-cultural approach to studying experts' support of novices' learning and other approaches which focus on particular techniques such as scaffolding. Rogoff distinguishes between the concepts of 'scaffolding' and of working in the zone of proximal development. She describes scaffolding as a specific technique focusing on what experts provide for novices; *it focuses on the tutor's efforts as they relate contingently to the novice's successes and failures* (p. 699). However, working in the zone of proximal development is, in her view, wider than scaffolding. It focuses on the processes of communication that builds a continually evolving mutual perspective. It is a way of describing an activity in which someone with greater expertise assists someone else ... *to participate in socio-cultural activities in a way that exceeds what they could do otherwise* (p. 699). Mutual contribution is an essential consideration so interactions and communicative and collaborative processes all form part of the picture, rather than just the child's successes or errors as in scaffolding. Rogoff argues that

*The concept of scaffolding does not refer to the institutional and cultural context in which it occurs, whereas the concept of zone of proximal development requires attention to processes of communication and the relation of the interaction at hand to institutional, cultural and historic processes.* (p. 700)

**Key point**

Supporting children's learning is an important part of assessment. For the practitioner this is often far more complex than simply applying a technique such as scaffolding. Learners make an equally important contribution.

Intersubjectivity and collaboration are important in scaffolding children's learning and we look at these two concepts below.

**Intersubjectivity and collaboration**

Rogoff (1990; 1998) has illustrated how children make an important contribution in collaborating in the process of establishing joint understanding. Children, including infants in the first year of life, can sometimes be observed to be deliberately taking the lead in collaborative activities by seeking information or by directing activities. Rogoff's analysis, consistent with Vygotsky, suggests that the intersubjectivity as achieved by adults and babies is different from that achieved by adults and children who can use linguistic (verbal and gestural) communication to achieve mutual understandings. This then has implications for the assessment process across the age range birth to six years.

Working in the zone of proximal development with a toddler will include the adult engaging in the demonstration of objects, collaborative activity with objects and the focusing of the child's attention. Rogoff (1998) points out that the child, for example in seeking to help the adult in everyday chores, very often initiates such activity. Older toddlers and young children will often seek to assert their independence in doing a particular task themselves but Rogoff's analysis of the research suggests that they also will actively seek assistance when they are stuck. Recently a question has arisen about the capacity of early years settings to support the kinds of relationships and shared experiences that enable children to engage in the types of social participation that promote optimum learning (Parker-Rees, 2007). The research indicates that the nature and scope of babies, toddlers and children's interactions with parents, the playful quality of these interactions and the extent to which relationships can influence reciprocal imitative behaviour (an important process of learning especially in the first year) must all be fully appreciated by practitioners and be seen as desirable conditions for learning in the setting.

**Key point**

The concept of collaboration is key when considering assessment from a socio-cultural perspective. In collaborating, the child and the practitioner are involved in each other's thinking processes through shared efforts. In order to assess certain aspects of learning by babies, toddlers and young children, it is essential for adults to collaborate with the children in order to understand their learning.

The co-construction of knowledge is supported by intersubjectivity and collaboration and it is to this that we next draw our attention.

**Children as co-constructors of knowledge**

In recent times the term 'co-construction' has featured prominently in influential early childhood publications, although it was implicit in the last century in the work of Dewey (1933) who emphasised the ways in which children construct their learning by actively engaging in, and shaping, their experiences and environments. For instance, Jordan (2004) discusses the term *scaffolding* and compares it with *co-construction*. The specific pattern of interaction that characterised early accounts of scaffolding, according to Jordan (ibid.) and Rogoff (1998), generally maintained the power and control with the adult. They argue that the term co-construction emphasises the child as a powerful player in his/her own learning. An example of how this process of co-construction works in practice is illustrated in the discussions of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998). Co-construction refers to adults and children making meaning and knowledge together (MacNaughton and Williams, 2004). Co-construction recognises the child's expertise and in order to understand this, the practitioner needs to interact with the child and become aware of the child's thoughts and thereby to establish intersubjectivity.

Recent research (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) also highlighted the process of co-construction and found it to be a key factor in terms of promoting children's learning. Essentially a co-construction perspective emphasises understanding and meaning on the part of both child and adult, rather than the acquisition of facts by the child. Jordan (2004) concludes that the two concepts, scaffolding and co-construction have different applicability depending on whether the goal of the practitioner is the exploration of thinking or the achievement of pre-specified learning goals.

**Key point**

Co-construction of meaning and knowledge is central to teaching, learning and assessment and it occurs when both child and practitioner engage together in achieving mutual understanding.

**Play as a context for formative assessment**

As this paper demonstrates, children's learning is complex and assessment approaches need to take cognisance of this. In early childhood, this complexity is abundantly evident as children engage in play. The importance of play to young children's learning and development is a key principle for early childhood practitioners (Wood, 2004). Assessing children's understandings and progress as they play, either alone or with others, is a crucial activity in early year's settings. In assessing the child's learning through play the adult can use a range of approaches and methods. Practitioners make assessments by focusing on children's play interests, their levels of engagement and participation. They make assessments while skilfully engaging with children in play. Skilful engagement includes intervention in play as and when appropriate. Such interventions may serve to initiate or sustain interactions, thereby leading to shared talking and thinking. They may also involve scaffolding children in order to enable them to reach their potential at a particular time. (See the research paper, *Play as a context for early learning and development* (Kernan, 2007) for detailed information on play.) Children's learning is a complex matter and assessment approaches need to take cognisance of this. The paper now looks at emerging approaches to assessment, all of which take account of play as a vehicle for learning and development.

**Key point**

Assessing children's understandings and progress as they play, either alone or with others, is a crucial activity in early year's settings.

**Emerging approaches to assessment**

The rationale for using assessment to enrich and extend children's learning can be located in recent developments in society's understandings of learning in the early years. For instance, in recent decades there have been very big changes in our understandings of human nature and of learning. Gardner (1999, p. 91) reviews what he describes as *several lines of evidence from the cognitive, neural, and developmental sciences which point to a far more capacious view of the human mind and of human learning than that which informed earlier conceptions*. He presents a picture of assessment that builds on the newly emerging picture of human development (see Table 1). Gardner's principles complement the earlier principles presented by Shepard *et al.* (1998). (See pages 16-17.)

**Table 1: Gardner’s understanding of human development and assessment and Shepard’s guiding principles of assessment**

Features of human development	Features of assessment
<p>In understanding human development, there is</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ a necessity for a developmental perspective</li> <li>■ an emergence of a symbol-system perspective</li> <li>■ evidence for the existence of multiple faculties or ‘intelligences’</li> <li>■ recognition of vast individual differences;</li> <li>■ the desirability of assessing learning in context</li> <li>■ locating competence and skill ‘outside the head of the individual’.</li> </ul>	<p>Assessment should</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ be simple, natural and occurring on a reliable schedule</li> <li>■ have ecological validity (be done in situations that are real)</li> <li>■ utilise instruments that are intelligence-fair and not dependent on language or logical faculties</li> <li>■ use multiple measures</li> <li>■ be sensitive to individual differences, developmental levels and forms of expertise</li> <li>■ use materials which are intrinsically interesting and motivating</li> <li>■ yield information to be used for the learner’s benefit.</li> </ul>

Performance and authentic assessment incorporate some of Gardner’s ideas and a discussion of these follows below.

### Performance assessment and authentic assessment

Emerging approaches to assessment take account of developments in theories about learning and about human development. Performance assessment is currently seen as an approach that is particularly appropriate for assessing many aspects of early learning and development (see Bowman *et al.*, 2001). Meisels (1999) describes performance assessment as assessments that are founded on the notion that learning and development can only be assessed over time and in interactions with materials, objects and other people. In this approach to assessment, the expectation is that tasks must be practical, realistic and challenging for children (Torrance, 2001). Performance assessment implies observation of children as they undertake a number of routine tasks in early learning settings. According to Meisels (1999, p. 58) these should meet a number of criteria:

- tasks should bring together various skills that children display and demonstrate during the course of interactions
- children should be assisted to perform to the very best of their ability
- tasks should be guided by developmental standards
- tasks should engage children in reflection about their work and in articulating their ideas about their learning.

Authentic assessment is a type of performance assessment. It is described as *compatible with the prevailing philosophy that emphasises whole child development* (Puckett and Black 2000, p. 6). This philosophy explains development across a range of domains (for example social, moral, emotional, language and cognitive). It also recognises the diversity of early learning and the role of environmental factors in shaping that learning. From an authentic assessment perspective, curriculum and assessment are interwoven and emphasise relevant and meaningful experiences. Assessment focuses on what children do, and on how they do it in the context of meaningful tasks. Authentic assessment has a number of identifiable features (Puckett and Black, 2000, p. 7), including the following:



- an emphasis on emerging development
- a focus on the young child's individual strengths and weaknesses
- is based on principles of child growth and development
- emanates from logical, meaningful, relevant and applicable curricula
- is performance based
- recognises different intelligence and learning styles
- is reflective and analytic
- is ongoing and occurs in many contexts
- is collaborative with learners, parents and others involved in children's learning
- is interwoven with teaching.

**Key point**

Authentic assessment is compatible with a whole child perspective on learning and development.



## **Summary**

Where the purpose of assessment is to promote further learning, assessment becomes a particular type of teaching strategy. (See Marshall and Drummond, 2006).

Assessment from a socio-cultural perspective takes account of the key learning processes as determined by socio-cultural theory. In particular, collaboration and the importance in that process of the establishment of mutual understanding (intersubjectivity) need to be emphasised, as do ideas about children's agency and those related to the co-construction of knowledge and understanding. An understanding of the different processes that contribute to children's learning, and the types of interactions that promote it are key to understanding how such learning can best be assessed. The recognition of these processes at work is also central in conceptualising assessment approaches that take account of and display the key role of children themselves in the assessment process. Authentic assessment reflects new understandings about learning and about human development, and recognises the holistic, contextualised and dynamic nature of learning in early childhood. Having discussed the interconnection between how children learn and approaches to assessment, the next section looks at what to assess in children's early learning and development.

## Section 3: What to assess in early learning

This section of the paper identifies aspects of learning that are of concern in assessing children's early learning and development. The challenges of assessing a wide range of learning and development in a balanced way are discussed.

### The essentials of learning

Skills and knowledge are important in respect of early learning. However, increasingly there are calls for a wider view of what it is that children are learning in the years from birth to six, and for explicitness about other areas of children's development that are now recognised as critical for long term success. For instance, Bertram and Pascal (2002) identify social competence, emotional well-being and dispositions to learn as core constituent elements of the effective learner. In relation to each of these areas they identify elements that characterise the effective learner. Indicators related to disposition include independence, creativity, self-motivation and resilience. Those related to emotional literacy include empowerment, connectedness, and positive self-esteem. Those related to social competence incorporate effective relationships; empathy; taking responsibility; assertiveness and awareness of self. *The Framework for Early Learning* describes early learning in terms of the themes of Well-being; Identity and Belonging; Communicating; and Exploring and Thinking. The assessment of children's progress in these areas is dependent on practitioner judgement, and from this perspective relatively subjective. As practitioners assess these they will look for evidence of development and learning in dispositions, knowledge, skills, values and attitudes.

The early childhood literature demonstrates how, in some instances particular consideration has been given to specific aspects of learning by prioritising that aspect above others. Depending on the particular aspects of learning foregrounded, there are obvious implications for the assessment of that learning, since these are what must also be looked at in the assessment process. For example in *Te Whariki*, (Ministry of Education, 1996) the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, the particular aspect of learning that is highlighted is dispositions. Consequently, the assessment of that curriculum emphasises dispositions in the accounts of children's learning (Carr, 2001). Further details of the rationale for this approach are discussed below. Also discussed are examples of situations wherein an alternative focus is adopted. Dispositions, cognitive development, emotional well-being or sense of self and sociability are the aspects of learning that are highlighted.

### Dispositions

Over the last few decades the idea of dispositions has emerged as important in the debate about what is of lasting value in learning. Carr (1999) describes learning dispositions as tendencies that dispose learners to interpret, edit and respond to learning opportunities in characteristic ways. Perkins, Jay and Tishman (1993) suggested a characterisation of disposition as having three components: *inclination*, *sensitivity* and *ability*. Some commentators have used this three-dimensional characterisation to argue that dispositions cannot be taught directly but that they flourish over an extended period of time (e.g. DeCorte, Greer and Verwschaffel, 1996). Children play an active role in the development of their dispositions by participating and collaborating in related activity. Indeed, Rogoff (1990, p. 171) draws our attention to what she refers to as ... *the essential nature of children's own eagerness to partake in ongoing activity*. Dispositions can be described as *relatively enduring habits of mind and action, or tendencies to respond to categories of experience across classes of situations* (Katz and Chard, 1992, p. 30). Desirable dispositions might include perseverance, risk-taking and curiosity. An undesirable one might be helplessness. Increasingly, early childhood curricula provide for the development of desirable 'learning' dispositions, alongside the development of skills and knowledge.

The assessment of learning dispositions has received a good deal of attention in recent years and continues to do so. Carr herself (2001) describes the process of assessing dispositions as one of assessing complex and elusive outcomes. Claxton and Carr (2004) conclude that, such is the complexity of tracking and assessing learning dispositions, no one method of assessment is adequate but what is required is the development of instruments and strategies that will integrate approaches such as learning stories with others, in order to

track and support the development of learning dispositions. The work of Smiley and Dweck (1994) illustrates clearly why identification of developing dispositions (both desirable and undesirable) is important. They found that children (under five years) were already displaying learning dispositions which in some cases would support optimum learning and development (where they displayed an orientation towards learning goals and a consequent tendency towards persisting and having a go), but in other cases would serve as obstacles (where they displayed an orientation towards performance goals and a consequent tendency to avoid taking a risk or avoid getting it wrong). Assessment that identifies developing dispositions will serve to alert practitioners to areas of development that need to be addressed. Looking at cognitive abilities in their broadest sense is also an important part of assessment.

### **A range of cognitive abilities**

Krechevsky (1998) explains how Project Spectrum was set up with the explicit aim of developing a new means of assessing the cognitive abilities of pre-school children. It is described as a research and development project based on the theories of Gardner and Feldman (Krechevsky, 1998). Both theories emphasise a broader view of human cognition than that offered by previous theories. Krechevsky describes how Gardner's theory emphasises a wide range of intelligences not previously identified or documented in assessing children's learning, while Feldman articulated a theory of universal and non-universal domains of development. During the course of the project curriculum and assessment materials were devised *which tapped a wider range of cognitive and stylistic strengths than typically had been addressed in early childhood programmes* (p. 1). According to Krechevsky (1998), the project provides early childhood practitioners with an alternative assessment tool to those traditionally used, and a framework for curriculum enhancement. Gardner (1999) describes how children are surveyed in a variety of intellectual domains (movement, language, mathematics, science, social, visual art and music) and in each case the approach used is one where children are exposed to experiences in the particular domain of interest and then an observation is made of how the child becomes involved in that domain. Specific tasks and measures that are engaging to children, for example mathematical games in the case of mathematics, are introduced in the course of natural classroom activity and children are assessed using these.

Observation of children in potentially challenging situations that arise in the ordinary course of events (for example, an argument with another child) is regarded as appropriate in assessing certain areas of development. Sometimes a fully quantifiable scoring system is used, on other occasions checklists are used or more subjective observations or judgements are made. Intellectual strengths and working styles are the focus of the assessments. Individual child-profiles are drawn up at the end of the year and these draw on both the informal and formal information gathered in each of the seven different domains of knowledge. They incorporate information from both the Spectrum assessments and the teachers' regular classroom observations. Krechevsky (1998) argues that in recognising abilities in music, movement, mechanical science and other areas not usually emphasised, Spectrum provides a way to build children's self-esteem and find ways that they can display competencies. The Spectrum system of assessment can be used in conjunction with any other means of assessing children's learning. It claims to embed assessment in meaningful real world activities; to blur the lines between curriculum and assessment; to attend to the stylistic dimensions of performance; to use measures that are intelligence-fair; and to avoid using language or logic as assessment vehicles (Krechevsky, 1998). Assessing children's emotional well-being is also part of a holistic approach to assessment.

### **Emotional well-being**

Laevers (2000) argues that well-being and involvement of children are key to enabling them to enter into what he terms *a flow state*. *This he defines as a manifest feeling of satisfaction and a stream of energy felt throughout the body... Young children usually find it in play* (pp. 24-5). This in turn is important, from Laevers' perspective, because it enables learning that effects deep structures on which competencies and dispositions are based. Laevers' approach to pre-school education is known as *Experiential Education* (Laevers, 1994), the essence of which is a focus on the child's experiences in the educational setting. Practitioners using this model carry out systematic observation of children using well-being and involvement scales at least three times a year. These scales were also used in England in the Effective Early Learning Project (Pascal, Bertram,

Mould and Hall, 1998). As with emotional competence, assessing self-concept and children's sociability is also important and yet challenging.

### **Self-concept and sociability**

Rogoff (1990; 1998) building on the work of Vygotsky, emphasised the social nature of cognitive development. From a socio-cultural perspective then the ways in which children operate in social contexts is clearly important for their learning and development and also has implications for assessment of learning and development. Broadhead's (2004) work explicates the links between intellectual development, the growth of language and the emotional well-being of children. Her Social Play Continuum offers the practitioner an observation tool; a tool for assessing children's social development; and a means of developing children's sociability. The continuum focuses on children's play activity and their language across the age range three to six years and it illustrates the increasingly complex ways in which children are able to operate socially and co-operatively.

Recent research concluded that one of the critical features of highly effective early year's practitioners was their ability to support children in the area of social relations (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002). In the most effective settings practitioners ... *supported children in being assertive, at the same time as rationalising and talking through their conflicts* (p. 12). For example, the use of story books and group discussions to work through common conflicts, and the subsequent documentation of children's reactions and interactions could provide important evidence of learning and development in this area. Assessing social development is an important part of the assessment process and it is clear that assessment in early childhood needs to assess the child's overall development and not just very specific skills or abilities.

### **Summary**

Early childhood practitioners need ways of assessing each and all of the various aspects of learning since they are all critical. It is particularly important that we pay close attention in early childhood to the assessment of the constructs that we know are essential for later achievement and the enhancement of life chances (Meisels and Atkins-Burnett, 2006). *The Framework for Early Learning* identifies these as well-being, identity and belonging, communicating, and exploring and thinking. Each of these contributes to children's development and none is sufficient in itself. Adams, Alexander, Drummond and Moyles (2004) make the following point:

*... it is the quality of the whole that must be continuously reviewed and evaluated. When children are demonstrably secure, happy, confident, even joyful, it is not necessarily an easy task to ask oneself whether they are, in fact, experiencing a challenging and worthwhile curriculum.* (p. 27)

While these remarks were made in the context of reporting on their findings regarding the extent to which the play-based Foundation Stage curriculum was being implemented in schools in the United Kingdom, they nevertheless raise a very crucial issue regarding the importance of assessing a range of aspects of early learning. Now that we have more information on what to assess we move on to looking at how to assess early learning.

## Section 4: How to assess early learning

This section of the paper explains the significance of a narrative approach to assessment in early childhood. A number of methods of assessing children's early learning and development are discussed. The process of documentation of information derived about children's learning is described with specific reference to the work of practitioners in Reggio Emilia, in Northern Italy.

### A narrative approach to assessment of learning in early childhood

Narrative or story approaches have been used by a number of educationalists both to understand practice and to communicate with others their thoughts about that practice. Bruner (1999b, p. 175) describes narrative as *a mode of thought and a vehicle for meaning making*. However, he also cautions that *if narrative is to be made an instrument of mind on behalf of meaning making, it requires work on our part -reading it, making it, analyzing it, understanding its craft, sensing its uses, discussing it* (p. 176). The implications then for narrative assessments are that they are not ends in themselves, but must be used as tools for reflection and for sharing with others in order to seek out possible other meanings. From Bruner's perspective then, narrative has both a meaning-making function and a communicative one.

Paley's work (1979; 1981) provides us with an example of a practitioner who has made extensive use of narrative in order to share her ethnographic observations of children. Her case-study narratives have been published in a series of books beginning in 1979 and have continued for over two decades. They illustrate her careful listening and deep reflection on what children had to say. Paley's work is of interest in relation to assessment since it clearly illustrates how this particular practitioner continually modified her teaching in response to her observations of children. Her use of the tape-recorder illustrates how reflection can be achieved even in a busy early education setting and especially how it can be done in discussion with children.

Genishi (1992) too emphasises the importance of storying for conveying aspects of everyday experiences in early childhood settings. The potential of stories as powerful tools was expressed by Witherell and Noddings (1991, p. 280) when they stated;

*They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems... They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect.*

Learning stories involve a narrative approach to assessment and we look at this credit-focused approach next.

### Learning stories: A credit-focused approach

Carr (2001) and her colleagues in the early childhood community in New Zealand developed the learning stories approach to documenting children's learning. This was developed in response to a need to develop a pedagogy that was consistent with new conceptualisations of early learning and development as encapsulated in *Te Whariki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996). The work on assessment in early learning that Carr and her colleagues undertook over several years was inspired by the work of Black and Wiliam (1998b). In particular, their strategies for how to improve learning through assessment provided some important starting points for progressing the work on early childhood assessment in New Zealand (Podmore and Carr, 1999). Influential ideas were developed in relation to a number of issues: the quality of practitioner-child interactions; the encouragement and support for children to take responsibility for their own learning; the specifics that enable children to move out of the low-attainment trap; and the development of positive learning dispositions.

Carr (2000, p. 32) describes learning stories as *structured observations, often quite short, that take a 'narrative' or story approach. They keep the assessment anchored in the situation or action*. The structure in Carr's approach is provided by the categories of observation that are directly linked to the strands of *Te Whariki*, the New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum. What is different about Carr's approach is the emphasis on assessment of learning dispositions through structured observation. Hers is a credit-based approach in the

sense that it involves identifying and building on the child's current abilities. The model takes a holistic view of learning and development and so gathers evidence in relation to children's developing dispositions and also their achievements and their progress over time (Carr, 2002). In this way it sets out to track children's learning journeys. In the learning stories approach telling the story of children's learning requires, then, rich and deep accounts of selected events as they are observed through specific lenses (in the case of the NCCA the themes of the curriculum). Carr (2001, p. 181) argues that *Learning Story assessments mirror and protect the complexity of learning by using a narrative approach*. These assessments are learner-centred as opposed to content-centred. They do not fragment children's learning and they pay attention to the positive, rather than focusing on need and deficit. Contrasting this credit-focused approach with her previous assessment practices, Carr comments as follows:

*In my folk model, assessment was designed to highlight deficits. This notion of the developing child as incomplete, a jigsaw with parts missing, means that the areas in which the child is 'unable' become the sites of greatest educational interest. Competencies that can be ticked off the checklist will attract little interest... The alternative approach is a credit model... The relevant community decide what domains of learning disposition are important... These are the sites of educational interest... (pp. 11-12).*

The learning stories approach, as developed in New Zealand (Podmore and Carr, 1999; Carr 2001), is a really important development in assessment practice in early childhood since it is an attempt to bring coherence between the socio-cultural approach to the curriculum *Te Whariki* and the assessment of children's learning in early childhood education and care settings. It serves to illustrate one way in which early childhood practitioners, both in New Zealand and elsewhere, might approach socio-culturally oriented assessment. Some practitioners in Ireland are currently using the learning story approach. Brennan (2004) demonstrates its use by practitioners to interpret and present children's learning in play situations (Brennan, 2004). A recent study which sought to implement the learning story approach in a junior infant class in a disadvantaged school in Ireland found that using this approach had a number of beneficial outcomes including tracking the development of crucial learning dispositions; highlighting aspects of subject-based learning; promoting collaborative assessment; and engaging parental participation and interest (Ennis, 2006).

#### Key point

Learning stories are accounts of specific instances of learning that capture its complexity and richness. The stories make both early learning and the assessment of that learning visible.

Learning stories are a useful approach to assessment, but developing them in a way that is really coherent with a socio-cultural approach is, as we shall see next, challenging.

#### A fully-contextualised account of learning

The extent to which the learning stories approach, as developed in New Zealand, can be said to be truly consistent with a socio-cultural approach to learning is challenged by Fler (2002). She argued that the extent to which practitioners would, in reality, move beyond an individualistic account of learning whilst using this approach is questionable. Fler's position is that a truly socio-cultural approach takes into account all of the aspects of the situation in which the assessment takes place. In her view, a socio-cultural approach to assessment makes it imperative to look beyond the influence of context on children's learning (the social influences approach) and also look at the adult-child sequences; the culturally mediated tools in use in the situation; and the culturally or institutionally derived ideals present.

Meisels (1999) also argues strongly for a dual focus on the child and on the environment in which the child is learning. From this perspective there is integration between an emphasis on the child's development and a recognition that the practitioner's perceptions shape the content of what is taught, learned and valued. His interactionist view draws attention to the fact that children are in interaction with the learning environment and they change the environment (as a result of actions and interactions) and the environment influences what they can accomplish. Meisels and Fler both share the view that assessments must focus jointly on the child and on the educational environment. Fler (2002, p. 113) suggests that what is interesting about

the socio-cultural approach to assessment is that *the adult's participation in the lived teaching-learning context, the cultural tools that are being used (e.g. board games, books, technological tools), and the children's participation are all examined*. In this approach three perspectives on the learning that occurs are taken account of: the individual (focusing on the individual child); the social (focusing on the interactions that take place in the situation); and the cultural (focusing on the institutional and cultural aspects of the context in which the assessment is taking place).

Fleer and Richardson (2004) describe assessment from a socio-cultural perspective as assessment that takes account of the whole learning journey of the group of children, rather than individuals. They describe how, in their own cutting edge research on assessment from a socio-cultural perspective, a number of aspects of the situation are recorded. These include the intentional interactions, the adult modelling, the use of cultural tools (for example, writing), the child-teacher interactions and the child-child interactions. In fact, Fleer (2002) suggests that Rogoff's (1998) elaboration of researching development from a socio-cultural perspective has been particularly useful for thinking about assessment practices in early childhood education. However, based on their own research, Fleer and Richardson (2004) argue that, when assessing learning, moving from an individualistic approach to a socio-cultural one is a major paradigmatic shift and will present many challenges to early childhood professionals. Challenging as it may be, Fleer (2002) nevertheless argues strongly that such a change is essential if there is to be coherence between prevalent pedagogical and assessment practices.

#### Key point

In assessing early learning and development, interactions and context are key to understanding the learning and development of the child.

In summary, recent developments in socio-cultural learning theories strongly suggest that as practitioners assess children's learning, there is a need to move away from focusing on individual thinking and move towards a focus on distributed learning and thus on assessment that uses multiple lenses, including the social and institutional. There is a seemingly irrefutable argument that assessment practices in early childhood education must move towards coherence with a socio-cultural view of learning and development. This implies an approach that reflects the complexity of the interactions between the child, the context and the people or objects that contribute to the learning at any given time. Both Carr and Fleer above represent efforts to align assessment practices with socio-cultural learning theories. They do so by using a story approach. Hall and Burke (2003) argue that, in the context of early childhood education, the story approach *is more likely than any other ways we have encountered to offer respectful accounts of learners and their learning as well as accounts that support future learning* (p. 143).

In the following pages various means by which practitioners gather information on aspects of children's early learning and development are explored.

## Methods for collecting information on children's learning

Genishi (1993, p. 66) suggests that *an adequate means of assessment is compatible with the curriculum it is to assess*. *The Framework for Early Learning* emphasises the themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communicating and exploring and thinking. There are a variety of methods that may be used in the assessment of these aspects of early learning and development. Authentic situations where children are engaged in meaningful and relevant tasks in everyday activities are the best context in which to assess. The observational, interactional, reflective and documenting skills of the practitioner will be key in carrying out assessments. Methods for assessing early learning and development are discussed in some detail in the pages that follow.

## Observing and empathising

Issacs (1930) remains one of the most influential of the early childhood pioneers. Perhaps her strongest legacy is her use of observations to assess children's learning and development. She strongly advocated the use of systematic observations and in the relatively free atmosphere of the experimental Malting House School she and her colleagues carried out a great deal of observations of children aged between two and nine years of age. Drummond (2000, p.4) describes how Issacs put her rich observational data to excellent use in drawing it together to construct *a coherent account of the development of children's intellectual and emotional powers*. Issacs' legacy is that she demonstrated vividly how looking closely at everything children do, think and feel is important in understanding their learning.

Practitioners who have close personal relationships with babies, toddlers and young children are the people best placed to make observations of their learning. Goldschmied and Jackson (2004) describe how such relationships provide the context within which children are most likely to seek appropriate support from adults and so progress their learning and development. It is also within the context of close relationships that children are most likely to make their feelings known and thus make it easier to assess their well-being. By knowing individual children very well, practitioners are then well placed to read and understand the messages that babies, toddlers and young children express through their body language and non-verbal and verbal behaviour. Knowledge of core developmental lines (for example mobility, manipulative skills, feeding and bodily care, and the acquisition of the ability to communicate in words) is seen by Goldschmied and Jackson (2004) as essential for practitioners in early education settings. Such knowledge equips them to play their part in ensuring that learning and development progress smoothly.

Pramling (2004) explores the different ways that children of different ages tell others about their perspective on the world. She concludes that any child's ability to tell stories or express his or her opinions or perspective is very much dependent on whether the child has a relationship with the practitioner and other children. She also argues that it is not enough just to listen, the practitioner's task is to then direct the child towards what it is we want her/him to learn.

### Key point

Observation is central in assessing the learning and development of children. Its validity is likely to be enhanced if a practitioner who knows the child well, and with whom the child has established a close relationship, carries out the observations.

There are a number of observational tools that have been used extensively for the assessment of early learning and development. For instance, *The Target Child Observation Schedule* was developed as a research tool for an observational study of three to five year-old children in England over three decades ago (Sylva, Roy and Painter, 1980). It has since been further refined for use in both research (see for example Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) and as a practice tool. *The Child Observation Record* was developed by High/Scope as a means for practitioners to assess learning and development in the six broad areas addressed in the High/Scope curriculum. This is a comprehensive assessment system (Bowman *et al.*, 2001) that focuses on child behaviour, emphasises the incorporation of anecdotal records and ensures that instruction is based on assessment information.

The practice of assessment through observation (and reflection and interaction) continues to be developed and framed within new and emerging theoretical frameworks. It is also important to note that practitioners can develop their own observational tools. The most important consideration is that the curriculum is used as a guide and any observational tools developed in the early learning setting focus on the areas that the curriculum highlights.

### Key point

Practitioners reflect on and interpret their observations and use that information to support further learning.

Children's interactions and conversations with the key people in their lives can tell us a lot about their learning and development. We look at these next.

### **Conversations with children**

Day-to-day conversations provide rich contexts for assessments of children's early learning and development. To maximise the potential of these conversations for assessment it is essential that practitioners listen carefully in order to understand what the child is seeking to communicate, either through gesture, behaviour or language (MacNaughton and Williams, 2004). Conversations with babies, toddlers or young children engage the practitioner in reflection and interpretation in their efforts to understand the child's intent. Skilful use of questioning during these conversations can elicit children's theories and understandings, enabling them to share feelings and engaging them in speculation and imaginative thinking (Fisher, 1990; Wood, 1992; Siraj-Blatchford and Clark, 2003).

Research indicates that for pre-school children, non-verbal signs are crucial for communication (see Flewitt, 2005, for a review of this research). Gestures such as imitating actions, intentionally using gaze, touching and pointing have been identified as key modes of expression and communicating for three-year-old children. These often accompany talk and supplement children's linguistic resources and abilities. The implication of this for assessment is that practitioners must be sensitive to this multi-modal dimension of children's expressions of meaning making. Flewitt's (2005) study of three-year old children indicated *how adults and children co-constructed meaning not only through words but also through gaze, facial expression, and body movements* (p. 220).

While multi-modality is a feature of children's expression of meaning, it is also a feature of their representations of meaning and it is essential to recognise this in the assessment of their learning. Anning and Ring (2004, p. 124) urge that we recognise that multi-modality *is core to children's preferred ways of representing and communicating their growing understanding of the world and their roles as active members of communities*. Children's mark making should always be considered to be intentional and analysis of mark-making and drawings can convey a great deal about children's emerging understandings of all aspects of their world, including those in the areas of numeracy and literacy (Worthington and Carruthers, 2003; Anning and Ring, 2004). Children's drawings can be understood as their personal narratives *which they use to order and explain the complexity and their experiences of the world* (Anning and Ring, 2004, p. 5). Discussions with children about their drawings, or listening to children explain their drawing to others, can give the practitioner rich insights into children's understandings, preoccupations, sense of identity, and interests.

However, there are also occasions when practitioners need to ascertain information about a young child's learning which is not evident from the child's performance in everyday activity in the education setting. The 'clinical' interview is a suitable method to use when the goal is to ascertain the young child's underlying thought processes. It is more formal than everyday conversation but still flexible and responsive to the child's responses.

### **Clinical interviews**

Variations on what is known as 'the clinical interview' have been identified as important in the search for new approaches to the assessment of early learning (Bowman et al., 2001). Piaget was very much a pioneer in the area of interviewing children. In *The Child's Conception of the World* ([1929] 1997) he discussed the challenge of exploring cognition and thinking in children and of the necessity for developing a sufficiently sensitive way of carrying out such explorations. Piaget developed what is now known as the *clinical interview method* in order to investigate underlying patterns in children's thinking. The clinical interview, as a method, has been developed over the years since first used by Piaget. It is especially of interest when traditional methods of enquiry, such as observation, are inadequate for the kinds of explorations needed to uncover children's thinking.

There is considerable flexibility in the interview design and an anticipation that the questioning will emerge and develop as the interview progresses. The approach is *deliberately non-standardised* (Ginsburg, 1997, p. 29). The word *clinical* is used to describe an aspect of the methodology. As Ginsburg explains, it is used

... not in the sense of focusing on pathology but in the sense of great sensitivity to and understanding of the **individual** [original emphasis] (p. 109). The practitioner acts as clinician in judging how to respond to different children by *being sensitive to the nuances of individual needs* (p. 140). There is reciprocity and mutual turn-taking in communicating and both the interviewer and the child become significantly involved in the development of the conversation (Doverberg and Pramling, 1993). Doverberg and Pramling (1993) describe how and why they use interviews and also exactly what is involved on the part of the child and the practitioner. Pramling (1983) described her purpose as exploratory rather than evaluative. The questions she put to children had no correct answer as such. Pramling's interviews with children were dialogical in nature. In her study of learning the purpose of the questioning was to come as close as possible to the child's world by enabling children to describe their experiences.

Ginsburg (1997) argues that this methodology helps to reveal the fluidity of children's thinking in that we may witness how children can appear to possess certain knowledge but can only exhibit it in certain situations, or in relation to particular tasks. The flexibility of the method means that the interviewer is free to respond by altering the task or the question as fitting. Also the dynamic aspects of children's thinking may be revealed as they interact with the ideas and tasks raised in conversation during the interview.

#### Key point

The fluid nature of children's thinking may result in children displaying learning in one situation and not in another. This means that it is important to assess children's understandings across a range of contexts and on a number of occasions.

More recently, Dunphy (2005) discusses the use of clinical interviews in the domain of number, with four-year-old children on the point of entry to infant classes in Ireland. Essentially the interviews provided information that could form the basis for planning children's learning experiences. Dunphy (2006) argues that, with some minor modifications, this methodology could be used by knowledgeable and informed practitioners as a way of assessing children's learning and development. One of the strengths of the method is its ability to assess both cognitive and affective aspects of children's understandings and indeed to assess children's dispositions in the domain of interest. Dunphy reported that interviewing was, in her experience, relatively efficient in assessing children's learning in the domain of number, in a relatively short amount of time. Consequently she argued that it is within the reach of practitioners in terms of the time commitment required. This is an important consideration since previous research has found that methods that required lengthy observations didn't work for busy practitioners (Fler and Richardson, 2004). While it may take practitioners time to perfect the technique of interviewing children, it appears that this pedagogical practice has a great deal to offer practitioners, in particular in relation to assessing children's learning and in clarifying goals for learning. How to compile an account of learning is another consideration and that is explored next.

#### Key point

Assessment of early learning and development requires practitioners' dedicated time and attention.

## Making sense of children's learning

This part of the paper looks at how to compile the information we have learned about children's learning and development and discusses documentation and portfolios.

### Sustaining learning and development through documentation

Documenting generally refers to the processes of recording, reflecting on and using information about children's learning. Documentation in the form of observations of children and extensive record keeping has long been encouraged and practiced in early childhood education and care (Katz and Chard, 1996). In recent years however, documentation practices in early childhood education have been greatly advanced by practitioners in the Reggio Emilia pre-schools.

In the Reggio Emilia pre-schools they focus intensively on the processes of learning. The documentation of learning includes detailed accounts of children's experiences, ideas and thoughts at different stages of their project work. It can be in a variety of forms including photographs, video and audio-recordings, comments from the various adults involved with the children's learning, comments from the children and transcriptions of the children's conversations. Rinaldi (1998, p. 120) describes how the educators there use notes, observation charts, drawings and other narrative forms as well as audio-tapes, photographs, slides and videotapes since they consider that all of these help to ... *make visible children's learning, the ways to construct knowledge, the emotional and relational aspects*. The tracking of that learning is also important. To the practitioners in Reggio Emilia, documentation is a strategy whereby children's learning can be traced. The interpretation of this documentation is critical and reinterpretation and discussion takes place in the company of colleagues. According to Malaguzzi (1998, p. 121) *it is in these shared moments of comparison of ideas and discussion (which are not always easy) that interpretative theories and hypotheses are generated*. Malaguzzi describes how in Reggio Emilia, documentation serves as a memory for children of activities undertaken. They use it as the basis of discussion so that they can revisit, reflect and interpret their own knowledge and that of others. It is used by practitioners to help children to evaluate their work. In this way it involves children in self-assessment. Shared with parents, documentation helps parents see not only what the child is learning but importantly how and why.

In Reggio Emilia they speak of a pedagogy of listening. They see listening to children as both necessary and expedient (Malaguzzi, 1998). It is seen as a core component of documentation. Rinaldi (1998, p. 120) describes listening *as a general metaphor for all the processes of observation and documentation*. She suggests that documentation offers the practitioner the unique opportunity to listen again and reflect on the learning processes observed. Dahlberg et al. (1999) are more explicit about what is involved in listening: *Listening means listening to the ideas, questions and answers of children, and struggling to make meaning from what is said without preconceived ideas of what is correct or valid* (p. 60). The documentation of children's learning: listening; observing; gathering documents; and interpreting them is a key aspect of pedagogical practice in Reggio Emilia. From this perspective documentation is more than a record of learning.

The *mosaic approach* to listening to children was developed by Clark and Moss (2001) as a means of including children's perspectives when developing services for them. Their approach illustrates how it is possible to use a variety of tools which enable children to convey their ideas and feelings to practitioners in a range of symbolic ways, besides talk, for example through photographs and drawings. They describe the approach as *a way of listening that acknowledges children and adults as co-constructors of meaning. It is an integrated approach which combines the visual with the verbal* (p.1) ... *a multi-method approach in which children's own photographs, tours and maps can be joined to talking and observing to gain deeper understandings of children's lives* (p. 3). Clark and Moss argue that the mosaic approach can also be used to listen to children's ideas about their learning. The process described by them appears to be potentially fruitful in relation to assessing the aspects of early learning as set out in the NCCA's *Framework for Early Learning*. The NCCA previously used the mosaic approach in their portraiture study *Listening for children's stories: Children as partners in the Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA 2007b).

**Key point**

Documentation, shared and discussed, can be an important source of professional development for practitioners. It can enhance relationships between practitioner and children and lead to better communication. It also serves to bring parents into the discussion of children's learning.

The next part of the paper explains how documentation can be compiled in portfolios so that it can be shared with children, parents and practitioners.

**Portfolios**

Portfolios offer a practical approach to the challenge of assembling and organising the range of information on children's learning and development (Puckett and Black, 2000). Portfolios are purposeful collections of evidence of early learning and development and of children's progress in relation to the learning goals of

the curriculum. They draw from the range of information on children's learning. In the case of babies and toddlers, the responsibility is on the practitioner (perhaps in conversation with parents or guardians) to select the information that will be compiled as a record of learning. As soon as they can, children should be encouraged to participate in the selection process with adults. Digital technologies, for example cameras and video recorders, offer considerable potential to enhance the range of material and information that can be assembled about children's early learning and development. Digital technology is also a useful way of collecting and presenting a great deal of information about a child's early learning and development in a succinct form. The material thus compiled has a number of functions: it can be the basis for adult/child conversations; it can be central in providing information to parents or guardians; it can be the basis for practitioner reflection, either by the practitioner alone or with colleagues; it can be the focus for planning activities based on what is known about the child.

A two-way flow of information between practitioner and parents is important. Parents are an important source of information about children's learning and development and their observations and insights are essential in putting together a comprehensive picture of individual children's strengths and needs. Information from practitioners can help parents support, extend and promote children's learning at home.

The processes of compiling, talking about and sharing portfolio work will also contribute to children's ability to think and talk about their own learning and that of others—helping them to become meta-cognitively aware. It also involves children in the process of self-assessment wherein they begin to be aware of goals for learning and of the possibility of setting their own goals, and reflecting on and making judgements about their own progress towards those goals. In emphasising this last point, Moyles (1989) argues that children

*... are frequently the best assessors and testers of what they have learned. Occasionally, they will quite exhaust themselves in proving to themselves and others mastery over a particular activity or material. In assessing children's learning, discussions with the children as an individual can often produce the most useful information especially as to concepts, knowledge and experiences gained, which, when supported with observations and careful records, give a good overall profile of that child (pp. 125-6).*

**Key point**

Involving children in discussing and evaluating their own work is important for their developing sense of themselves as learners.

## Summary

A narrative approach to assessment of early learning appears to have much to offer practitioners. It has the potential to portray a rich picture of early learning and development, and to capture its complexity. It also provides a focus for reflection and a means of communicating with others, including children and parents, about the learning it describes. However we have also seen that it is not without its challenges. From a socio-cultural perspective it is important to avoid focusing only on the individual child, but to attend also to the social and cultural aspects of the situation and to include these when appraising the learning. Documenting all of this is demanding, as is making sense of the information and deciding on its implications for planning further learning experiences.

Key methods for assessment are observation, empathising, listening and reflecting. Observations and adult-child discussions always have been and will remain central to assessment of early learning and development. Observation is the principal method at the practitioner's disposal when assessing babies and toddlers. As children move up through the age range they begin to use other symbolic means, in particular language, to express and communicate their meanings and then there are a wider range of possibilities for assessment to supplement the practitioner's observations. A wide range of ways to record their observations is available to practitioners. Indeed, any record of any aspect of children's learning can contribute to the documentation. For example, when the concern is the development of a specific skill set, the practitioner may wish to include a culturally and linguistically appropriate checklist in the documentation and this can contribute to the assessment of the child's learning (See Krechevsky 1998, for examples of how and when checklists can be used). The appraisal of children's products (for example their mark-making and drawings) will also contribute to the overall picture of children's early learning and development.

Children themselves should be involved in assessing their own learning and development where possible. All of the adults who interact with individual children will have something to contribute in relation to assessing learning. Portfolio assembly should be done in conjunction with children. The main concern is that a variety of assessments are made, at different times and using a range of tools so that the richest possible picture of learning and development emerges. Such a picture is compiled from examples and accounts of learning and clearly indicates the child's strengths as well as areas for development.

The next section of the paper looks at professional development for early childhood practitioners to support them in developing their assessment practice going forward.

## Section 5: Assessment and the practitioner

This section identifies and discusses the demands which assessment makes of practitioners in carrying out assessment of early learning and development in ways that enhance children's learning and development; are sensitive and respectful to children; do justice to children; protect children's rights, and ultimately support children's further learning and development. This discussion may be helpful in mapping the way forward in supporting the early childhood sector in developing assessment practice.

### Professional knowledge

The importance of looking at assessment from the basis of sound professional knowledge of all aspects of early learning and development is articulated as follows:

*Perhaps it is now time to shift the emphasis in the early years; time to move from a position whereby starting with the child has prevailed into one where we begin from an informed understanding of learning. As we move into an era where observations in early year's settings become the norm rather than the exception, let's not think about watching the children; rather let us talk and think about understanding their learning (Broadhead, 2006, p. 202).*

Assessment is a matter of informed judgement. It involves the practitioner in judging the nature and extent of a child's learning and development; the significance of the learning under scrutiny; the role of the context in that learning; and how best to support further learning and development. The ability to make informed judgements then is critical to the process assessment. Judgements about the learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children are informed by professional knowledge (see, for example, Athey 1999). This will necessarily include;

- a comprehensive understanding of early development and learning
- an understanding of diversity amongst children and families
- a sound understanding of subject matter content and pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986)
- an understanding of the integration inherent in early learning
- an understanding of ways in which authentic assessment may be carried out (Shepard *et al.*, 1998; Shepard, 2000; Puckett and Black, 2000; Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall and Wiliam, 2003).

Assessment engages the practitioner in theorising (Bowman *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, Carr (2001), in writing of the learning stories approach, highlights the issue that while the approach provides evidence of learning, translating the learning stories into assessments can be very challenging. Putting observational data to good use was found to be an area of professional activity that practitioners in New Zealand needed support with (Carr, May and Podmore, 2000).

#### Key point

Considerable professional understanding is required to carry out assessment of early learning and development.

### Skills base

Practitioners draw on a range of skills in carrying out assessments and in using information from those assessments to support children's learning and development. Interactive skills have been shown to be of particular significance (see Section 2). These include scaffolding and co-construction. Different skills are appropriate for different purposes. Skills such as questioning, talking and listening play a key part in using assessment to impact positively on learning and development. Observing, documenting and reflecting likewise are necessary especially in supporting practitioners to come together to analyse and interpret information about early learning and development.

**Key point**

Good assessment practice by the practitioner is dependent on a range of highly developed skills.

**Ethical considerations**

It is imperative that practitioners consider a range of ethical issues when assessing children's early learning. Trusting children to show what they are learning and respecting their learning agendas is paramount. It requires receptiveness on the part of the practitioner to children's ideas and openness to listening for their messages. Receptiveness to children's mood and assent and sensitivity to different communicative modes is also something that warrants careful consideration. Practitioners also need to ensure that they give adequate time to the assessment process in order to do justice to children's learning and development. An increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse population of children in early educational settings in Ireland means that in many cases the practitioners with whom children interact have different cultural perspectives. For many children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds the language of the early learning setting will not be the language spoken in the home. Both cultural differences and communication difficulties present very specific challenges in terms of the assessment of the learning and development of these children. In order to adequately assess the learning and development of culturally diverse children it is essential that practitioners are culturally competent (Valdivia, 1999). Because of the central role of language in learning it is also crucial that practitioners are well informed about language acquisition, second language acquisition and the assessment of learning and development in this area (Siraj-Blatchford and Clark, 2003). Assessment of the abilities of children whose first language is not the language of the setting needs to incorporate information from parents/guardians in order to build a picture that reflects honestly that child's strengths, interests and needs as a young learner.

**Key point**

Assessment involves the practitioner considering a range of ethical issues.

**Manageability of assessment**

As this paper has highlighted, assessment of early learning and development is extremely complex and potentially time-consuming. Authentic assessments of children's learning and development necessitate using a number of assessment methods including observation, child conversations, and documentation. Through these methods, the practitioner gathers information on children's emerging skills, knowledge, understandings, feelings and dispositions. Practitioners reflect on and discuss the information with others including children, parents and other practitioners. Practitioners in Reggio Emilia spend a great deal of time on documentation and reflection (see Section 4) facilitated by procedures that are built into their system in order to facilitate a high level of practitioner activity and engagement in the documentation process. The amount of time needed to engage in new forms of assessment of early learning and development is something that many teacher-practitioners raised in a study of practice with young children in Cork schools (Ridgway, 2001). Research indicates that the issue of manageability is not just of concern to some practitioners here in this country. It has also emerged as an issue with practitioners in other countries, for instance in Australia (Fleer and Richardson, 2004).

**Key point**

The assessment of children's early learning and development needs to be manageable for practitioners.

## Tensions

The process of carrying out assessment can give rise to tensions. One of these relates to curriculum and more specifically to how the curriculum is articulated. For example, a tension is introduced in situations where curriculum imperatives such as the achievement of specified objectives make assessing using authentic tasks challenging. This presents particular challenges for practitioners working with children in infant settings in primary school. Using authentic assessment involves infant teachers designing relevant, meaningful and engaging tasks that enable young learners to display subject-specific knowledge, skills, understandings and attitudes, and which enable the teacher to discern aspects of learning such as dispositions. Undoubtedly, a tension exists also between subject-specific assessments and more holistic assessments. The teacher may be faced with the dilemma of how to focus on holistic issues of importance such as self-concept and creativity while at the same time focusing on subject-specific learning such as levels of phonological awareness, or knowledge of numbers. This is a reminder of the need for practitioners to have not only an extensive understanding of early learning and development but an equally extensive knowledge of how to make, for example, literacy accessible to the child across his/her learning.

A further tension exists between the use of what practitioners might consider the more manageable tools for observation of learning such as checklists and the use of more time-consuming tools such as learning stories. These tools serve very different purposes. Checklists may provide a useful way of capturing important information for example in the case of skills development (see Kreschevsky, 1998 for examples of checklists used as part of an overall portfolio of children's learning). The danger is that practitioners may, in the course of a busy day, find it more manageable to use the less demanding tool (checklists) rather than compiling rich and potentially more useful narrative accounts of children's learning (learning stories).

Bowman *et al.* (2001) argue that what early childhood practitioners know and are able to do is one of the major influences on the learning and development of babies, toddlers and young children. This paper has consistently argued that an understanding of early learning is crucial for assessment in early childhood. Practitioners equipped with such an understanding are in a position to embrace the challenges of finding ways of assessing early learning which enhance children's learning and development; which are sensitive and respectful to children; which do justice to children; which protect children's rights, and which support children's further learning and development.

### Key point

Tensions that arise in practising appropriate assessment in early education settings can have significant influence on what is assessed and how that assessment is carried out.

## Concluding comments

This paper describes current thinking, nationally and internationally, in relation to assessment in early childhood education. Central to the paper is the point that assessment in early childhood is about making children's early learning visible. We have seen that this can be achieved through the processes of collecting information about children's learning and development, documenting that information, reflecting on it and then using the information to support and extend learning. We have also seen that the character and complexity of early learning means that assessment is also complex. It necessitates the employment of methods that will allow for the development of suitably rich accounts of children's early learning and development.

This paper emphasises the need for assessment practices in guidelines developed by the NCCA to be coherent with the socio-cultural perspectives on learning and development. A number of interesting issues, tensions and challenges arise from the material explored in the paper and these are highlighted and discussed.

Assessing a range of aspects of learning as children engage in everyday activity in their early learning setting, and doing this work routinely as part of daily activity is clearly indicated in the paper as good practice in terms of assessing children's early learning and development. It appears that a narrative approach to describing early learning is one that offers practitioners a way of providing a rich picture of early learning through documenting particular instances of learning, a focus for reflecting on learning and of making decisions regarding provision and a way of communicating with others about children's learning. However, we have also seen that narrative approaches are challenging to implement in practice.

Seeing children as active participants in assessment and recognising and acknowledging the fact that children themselves play a vital role in the process may, for some practitioners, present a new perspective on assessing early learning. The wide range of ways in which children may present and communicate their learning and development may also need to be explored by practitioners. Consideration of the key roles of culture and of language in the assessment process may be the way to encourage practitioners to consider some of the ethical issues that the paper highlights.

The paper also highlights the extent of the understandings and the range of skills needed by practitioners in order for them to engage in assessing early learning and development. It is clear that a thorough knowledge of how children learn, but also sensitivity to the many ways in which they may display learning and development during the years from birth to six, is critical. Cultural competence is seen to be very important for the practitioner, as is knowledge of how children may be introduced to culturally important areas of learning such as literacy and numeracy. The relationship between practitioner and individual children is highlighted as central in terms of assessment and we have seen how evidence of learning and the extension of that depend so much on very specific types of interactions between practitioner and individual children.

Supporting practitioners to approach assessment of early learning with enthusiasm and confidence in order to make sound judgements about children's learning and to identify ways to support and extend that learning, is a central concern arising from the paper. Professional preparation and development as part of pre-service and in-service are fundamental to helping practitioners develop the skills and understandings they need to competently assess early learning on a day-to-day basis. Appropriate contextual supports such as adequate time and opportunity to meet with colleagues are also essential. The guidelines on assessment which will be part of *The Framework for Early Learning* will also provide support in enabling practitioners to meet the challenges presented in relation to the assessment of early learning.

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National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)



# Aistear

*Creatchuraclam na Luath-Óige*  
*The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*



**Supporting early learning and  
development through formative  
assessment: A research paper**

**Executive Summary**

# **Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment: A research paper**

## **Executive Summary**

By Elizabeth Dunphy, EdD

Commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, NCCA

# Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment

## An executive summary

The paper *Supporting early learning and development through formative assessment* describes the theory, research and practice contexts which help inform the assessment guidelines in the *Framework for Early Learning*<sup>1</sup>. The paper begins by exploring the interrelatedness of teaching, learning and assessment, and by describing 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. Informed by this discussion, the paper then responds to the question – *what should we assess and how?* Finally, the paper maps the way forward in developing assessment practice by identifying the importance of professional development opportunities.

Six themes emerge across the paper. These are synthesised in this executive summary.

### 1. Characteristics and complexities of early learning

Early learning is highly complex and it is recognised that finding ways to assess this learning which adequately convey this complexity is challenging. For instance, the child's home experiences and culture are relevant when assessing the child's learning since these are the social and cultural context in which much early learning takes place. Also, it is imperative to take into account the child's home language and to consider issues related to this when assessing learning and development. Some possibilities for assessing and documenting early learning and development have been developed in recent times. These are mainly in the area of authentic assessment. As far as possible, assessments should be carried out in the context of everyday activities that are meaningful and relevant to the child and using tasks that make sense to the child. They should be carried out over time, using a range of methods and in a variety of contexts.

Assessment which supports early learning is informed by understandings of the characteristics and dynamics of early learning.

### 2. Centrality of relationships

Whether through observing or interacting with a baby; through observing a toddler engaged in everyday activity; through interviewing a child about some aspect of learning; through documenting children's reactions to specific events or experiences, the practitioner develops increased understanding of what and how the child is learning by interacting with the child. This in turn can promote an increase in learning and development by both the practitioner and the child.

Parents/guardians, because of the nature of their unique relationship with children, have a very important contribution to make to the process of assessment.

Relationships are central to the assessment of early learning and development.

<sup>1</sup> The *Framework for Early Learning* was renamed *Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* in 2009.

### 3. Interactive processes

Assessment of early learning and development is often an interactive process that involves the practitioner in interacting with the child in order to understand his/her learning and development. Watching, listening, talking to, and empathising with children are central to good assessment practices in early childhood education. Recent theories have stressed the active nature of the learner and the key role to be played by the adult in assisting children to display their learning and development to the full. Assessments of early learning are interactive, informal and often embedded in everyday activities. The interactions between practitioners and learners are central to effective pedagogy in early childhood education. Children's engagement with peers is also important for highlighting the learning processes.

Assessment of early learning and development depends to a large extent on interactive processes.

### 4. Assessing what is valued

In *Towards a framework for early learning: A consultative document* (NCCA, 2004) a set of values for early learning and development was articulated. Such aspects of early learning can be challenging for practitioners to assess. They require a range of assessment methodologies that focus on holistic learning and development while at the same time ascertaining information on children's learning and development in the areas of learning that are prioritised in the curricula that apply to the setting.

Assessments are holistic in nature. The breadth and complexity of children's learning is recognised in the assessment of that learning. They cover all aspects of a child's development and are concerned with dispositions, skills, attitudes and values, knowledge and understandings. Assessment focuses on strengths and also on aspects of learning that need further development.

Assessing what is valued in terms of early learning and development must be a core principle.

### 5. Authentic assessment

Assessment of early learning and development is informal, carried out over time, and in the context of the child's interactions with materials, objects and other people. It is most effective when it is authentic in the sense that it takes place in real-life contexts where it is embedded in tasks that children see as significant, meaningful and worthwhile. Play is a key part of children's learning and development and thus an important part of the assessment process. Informal assessments, carried out as children engage in experiences they see as relevant and meaningful, are likely to produce the best and most comprehensive picture of early learning and development.

Authentic assessment, where children are assessed when involved in everyday activity in early education settings, is a key approach for assessing early learning and development.

### 6. Professional development for assessment

The theory and practice divide in assessing early learning and development is difficult to bridge. This is essentially a question of professional knowledge and of the extent to which practitioners understand and appreciate the issues relating to assessment of early learning and development. Research indicates that while teachers of four to six year old children in primary schools are open to the idea of new practices, they are still very much of the mindset that assessment and teaching are separate practices. There is also evidence that they are unsure about aspects of assessment practice, for example how to focus their observations and how to use the information gleaned to plan future learning (NCCA, 2005). Indeed, assessment policy and practice

are areas identified by the Department of Education and Science (DES) (2005) as areas of provision that require considerable attention in primary schools.

Early childhood practitioners need to think differently about the relationship between teaching, learning, curriculum, and assessment. Only then are they likely to appreciate that assessment is not something that happens after learning but rather something that happens in learning. Education and development is required to ensure that early years practitioners are equipped to carry out assessments that adhere to principles of good practice, that are conducted in a skilled and informed way, and that do justice to children. This education and development must take place initially at pre-service level and be refined and supported in the settings in which they practice. Without these opportunities practitioners are unlikely to embrace new practices. Indeed, there is evidence that early childhood practitioners resist new forms of assessment when they don't see assessment as a prime activity of teaching.

Practitioners need extensive education and development in the area of assessment.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a central concern arising from the paper is supporting practitioners to approach assessment of early learning with enthusiasm and confidence in order to make sound judgements about children's learning and to identify ways to support and extend that learning. Professional preparation and development as part of pre-service and in-service training is fundamental to helping practitioners develop the skills and understandings they need to competently assess early learning on a day-to-day basis. Appropriate contextual supports such as adequate time and opportunity to meet with colleagues are also essential. The guidelines on assessment as part of the *Framework for Early Learning* will also provide support in enabling practitioners to meet the challenges presented in relation to the assessment of early learning.

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National Council  
for Curriculum and Assessment  
24 Merrion Square  
Dublin 2, Ireland.

Telephone: +353 1 661 7177  
Fax: +353 1 661 7180  
E-Mail: [info@ncca.ie](mailto:info@ncca.ie)  
Website: [www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)