

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND
ASSESSMENT



TOWARDS A FRAMEWORK FOR
EARLY LEARNING
FINAL CONSULTATION REPORT

MAY 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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

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

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

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

Key idea: A national framework

Participants reported that:

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

Key idea: Vision

Participants reported that:

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

Key idea: Aims

Participants reported that:

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

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

Key idea: Image of the child as a learner

Participants reported that:

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

Key idea: The adult's role

Participants reported that:

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

Key idea: Thematic framework

Participants reported that:

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

Key idea: The role of assessment

Participants reported that:

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

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

Key idea: Contents of the framework

Participants reported that:

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

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

Participants reported that:

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

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

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

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

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

TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	i
List of Figures	viii
List of Tables	ix
SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION	1
SECTION 2: THE CONSULTATIVE PROCESS	7
SECTION 3 FINDINGS - RESPONSE FORMS	11
SECTION 4 FINDINGS - REGIONAL SEMINARS, BRIEFINGS, WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS, INVITATIONAL SEMINAR	31
SECTION 5 PRELIMINARY SIGNPOSTS FOR ONGOING WORK	61
REFERENCES:	65
APPENDIX 1: RESPONSE FORM	67
APPENDIX 2 QUESTION GUIDE FOR BILATERAL MEETINGS	75
APPENDIX 3 QUESTION GUIDE FOR REGIONAL SEMINARS	79

LIST OF FIGURES

SECTION 3

Figure 3.1: Profile of respondents by profession

Figure 3.2: Work setting of respondents

Figure 3.3: Respondents who worked/had worked with children with SEN and children whose first language was neither Irish nor English

SECTION 4

Figure 4.1: Profile of consultation participants by profession

LIST OF TABLES

SECTION 3

Table 3.1: Response to the development of a national framework

Table 3.2: Response to the vision

Table 3.3: Response to the aims

Table 3.4: Response to the image of the child as a learner

Table 3.5: Response to a thematic framework

Table 3.6: Response to the adult's role

Table 3.7: Response to the role of assessment

Table 3.8: Response to the contents of the framework

Table 3.9: Response to the model for presenting the child's learning

SECTION 4

Table 4.1: Regional seminars

Table 4.2: Briefing meetings

Table 4.3: Written submissions

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

The curriculum context

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The environmental context

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Structure of the report

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

The report comprises six sections as follows:

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

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

SECTION 2: THE CONSULTATIVE PROCESS

Rationale for the consultation

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

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

Consultation activities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Response forms

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

Part 1 required respondents to provide information regarding

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

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

The response form was available in multiple formats.

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

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

Regional seminars

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

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

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

Briefing meetings

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

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

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

Written submissions

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

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

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

Invitational seminar

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

SECTION 3: FINDINGS - RESPONSE FORMS

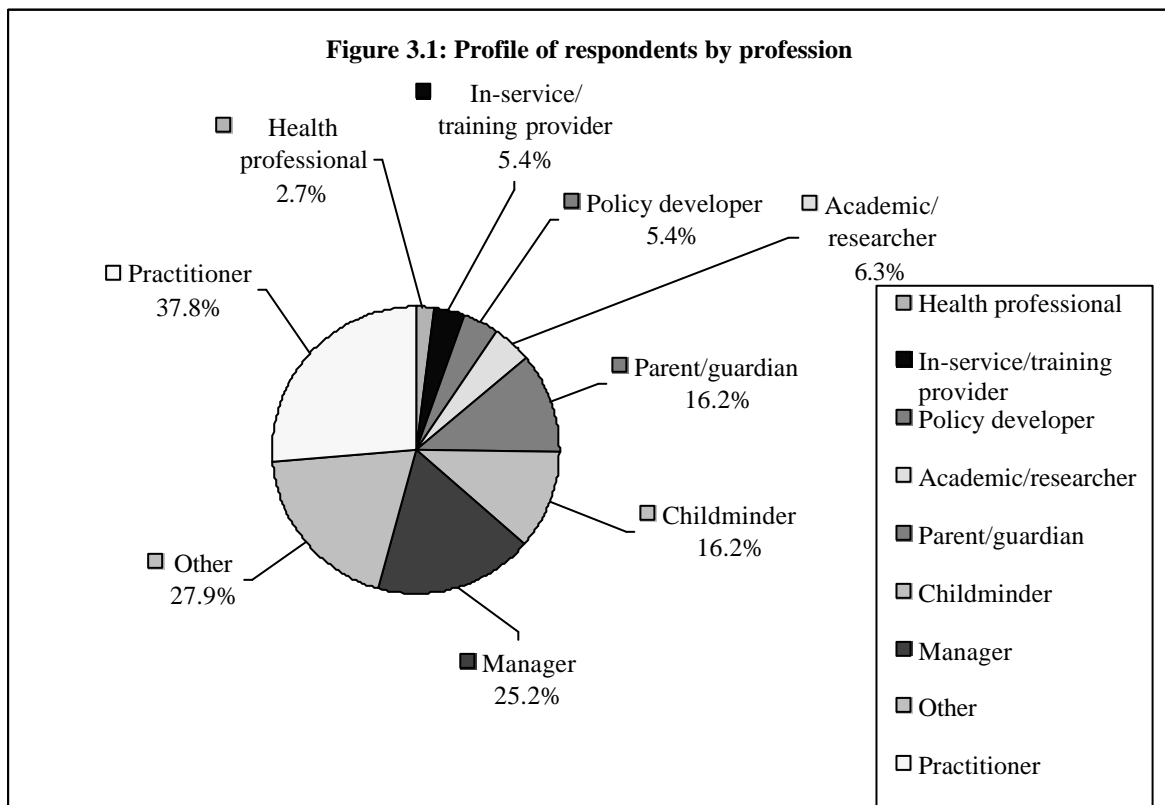
Introduction

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

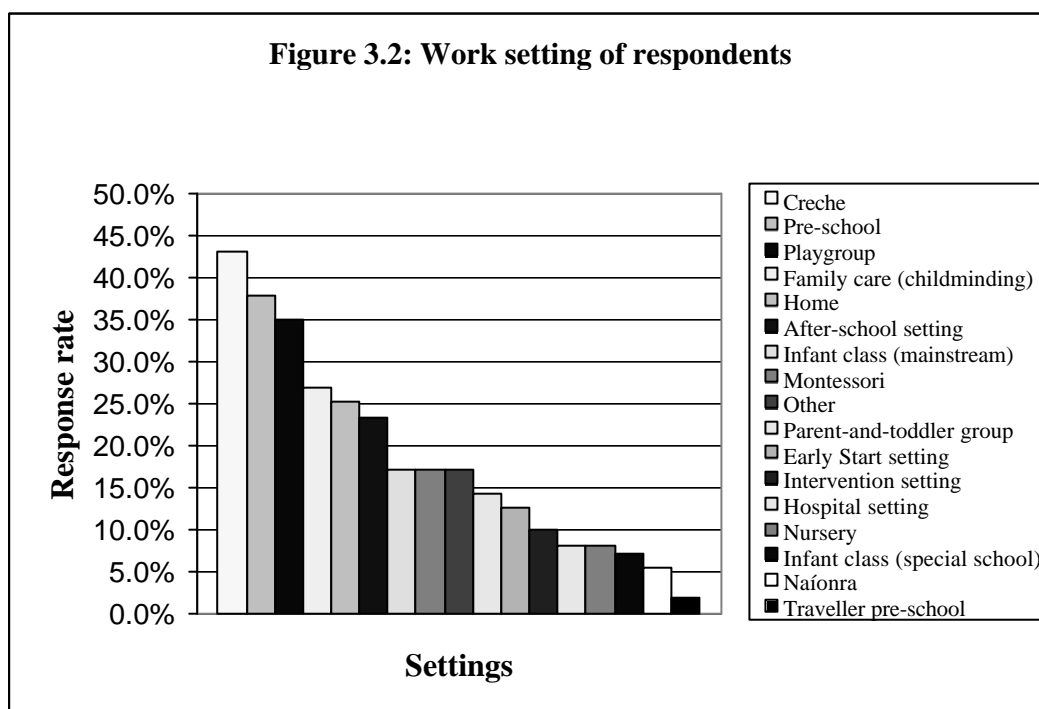
On receipt of completed response forms, the data on the hard copies were inputted to an online survey tool (www.surveymonkey.com). This online tool enabled the NCCA to separate the quantitative data from the qualitative. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social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

Analysis of findings

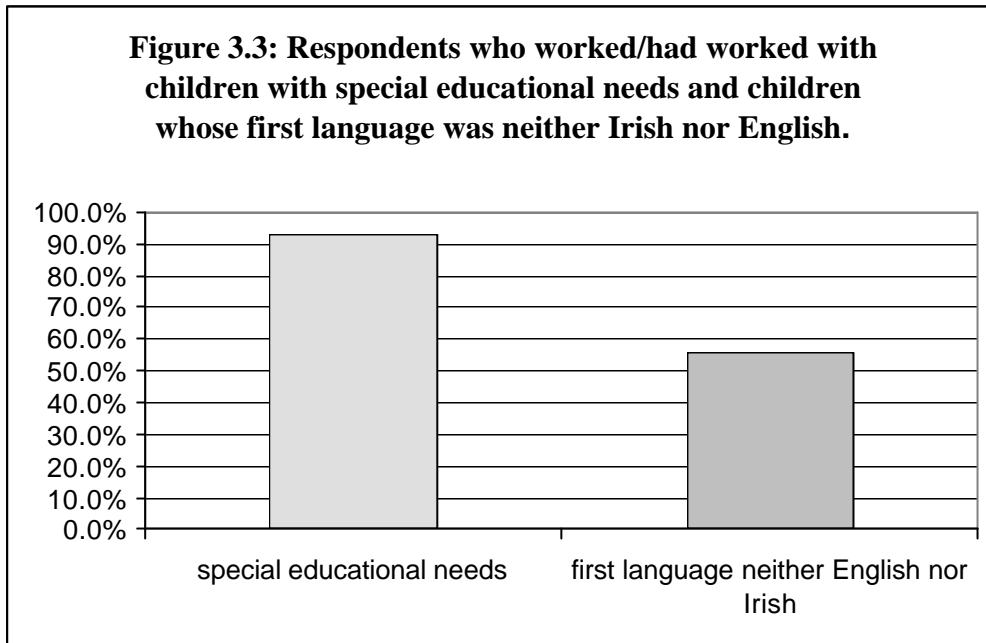
Part 1: Profile of respondents



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



The broadly representative nature of the respondents as a group was reflected in the analysis of the settings in which they reported working. Respondents frequently ticked a number of settings again reflecting the breadth of their experiences in working with young children. The most frequently represented setting was crèches (43.2%) with pre-schools (37.8%) and playgroups (35.1%) equally being well represented. The least represented settings included Traveller pre-schools (1.8%), Naíonraí – Irish medium playgroups (5.4%) and Infant classes in special schools (7.2%). This would reflect the number of such settings nationally.



The majority of respondents (92.9%) reported that they worked/had worked with children with special educational needs. This response could be reflective of greater inclusion of children with these needs in mainstream settings.

Over half of respondents (55.7%) reported that they worked/had worked with children whose first language was neither Irish nor English. This is probably indicative of the increasing multi-cultural nature of Irish society and the growing participation of children whose first language is neither Irish nor English, in early childhood settings.

Part 1: The most important considerations in enriching and extending children's early learning

Participants were asked to list what they considered to be the three most important considerations in enriching and extending children's early learning. It was suggested that they could make reference to a particular approach to early learning if they so wished. 86 responses were received for this question. The analysis of this data saw the emergence of three main themes; the child as a learner, the role of the adult and the environment.

1. The Child as a learner

This theme received most attention and could be split into three sub-themes; the child as a learner, a child-centred holistic approach and inter-departmental co-operation.

The Child as a learner

95% (82) of respondents made reference to the child as a learner. 23% (20) stressed the importance of learning through play. The level and quality of play opportunities offered was considered significant. 13% (12) of respondents specifically mentioned active learning and felt that it should be encouraged, e.g., *'young children's learning*

will be enriched and extended in a well planned learning environment designed to promote and support active learning'.

Linked to this was the view that learning should be fun. The Highscope approach to early learning was advocated by a number of respondents. 9% (8) of respondents considered that children's *'interaction with adults and children through play as they learn to share and communicate with others'*, was of benefit in their social development. Some felt that children should be granted the freedom to choose activities and develop naturally. Others stressed the importance of a language rich environment. It was suggested that the maturity of a child should be taken into account when making a decision about a child's *'readiness'* for school. It was also noted that a child's ability to learn very much depended on his/her *'health, social and psychological development'*.

A child-centred holistic approach

It was the opinion of 18% (16) of respondents that the individual needs of children should be supported and that a child-centred holistic approach should be adopted *'so that every child can develop to his/her potential'*. This was deemed to be of particular importance for children with special educational needs. It was suggested that child adult ratios should be low enough to *'allow for thorough observation of children and the subsequent planning of programmes to meet the individual needs of children with all their differences'*. 10% (9) of respondents stressed the importance of encouraging the development of children's self-esteem and confidence and of fostering independence.

Inter-departmental co-operation

Very closely linked with a child-centred holistic approach is the co-operation of outside agencies when required. 9% (8) of respondents were of the opinion that, particularly in the case of a child with special educational needs, the early intervention of speech therapists, social workers and other medical staff is necessary to support learning.

2. The Role of the Adult

The second major theme that emerged was the role of the adult. Again this can be broken down into a number of sub-themes; the role of the adult, training and planning and assessment.

The Role of the Adult

The quality of care provided by the caregiver was considered an important factor in enriching and extending children's early learning by 18% (16) of respondents, *e.g., 'having a caring adult who provides love, security and opportunities to develop and who has a knowledge of child development'*.

16% (14) felt that the role of the adult should be to support, guide and scaffold children's early learning. Parental involvement was considered essential and the concept that the parent is the primary educator and the home is the first classroom was

stressed. It was also considered important that the caregivers should praise and encourage children in addition to spending time listening to them.

Training

19% (17) of respondents believed that carers and educators should be suitably qualified and that continuing to update skills and knowledge was desirable. 6% (6) also felt that the provision of support and information for parents was necessary if they were to develop their role as primary educators to the fullest.

Planning

15% (13) of respondents expressed the view that early learning is best promoted and supported in a well-planned learning environment. It was suggested that this planned approach could enrich and extend learning by providing variety, opportunity, continuity and development. It was considered important that all staff should be familiar with this planned approach. Likewise, '*a systematic approach to good practice, policies and procedure*' was advocated. 3% (3) of respondents suggested that it would be worthwhile to have an individual learning plan for each child.

Assessment and Evaluation

14% (12) of the replies received, mentioned assessment or evaluation. One respondent noted, '*the first consideration in enriching and extending children's early learning is to identify the needs of the child. An identification / assessment / screening process is essential and should be provided for all children*'

Observation was listed as being an important means of assessing both a child's needs and development. Regular evaluation, both of the curriculum and of each child's progress, was considered to be helpful. Programmes could subsequently be revised '*in the light of findings*'.

3. The Environment

77% (67) of respondents considered the environment to have an important influence in enriching and extending children's early learning. 25% (22) of the respondents felt that if learning was to take place, then the environment in which it was to happen should be safe, secure and happy. 13% (12) were also of the opinion that the learning environment should be rich and stimulating, while others deemed it important that children should be presented with a range of choices and experiences. 17% (15) of respondents felt that, in order to support children's learning, it was necessary to have age-appropriate equipment and materials, adequate buildings and spaces and the facilities to allow outdoor play. The home environment was referred to as being an important learning environment. The child's background and socio-economic circumstances were listed as having a bearing on learning. 5% (5) of the respondents felt that good communication between caregivers, parents and schools was beneficial and they were in favour of schools adopting a friendly, open approach where both parents and pupils would feel welcome.

Part 1: Open comment at end of response form

The final section in the on-line response form provided respondents with an opportunity to make any additional comments that they felt would be important for the development of the framework. 59 responses were received. The analysis of these responses can best be summarised under the following headings:

1. Agreement

Of the responses received, just over 33% (20) welcomed, and expressed strong support for, the development of a framework document. This would be '*vital*', making '*an important contribution to the early learning stage of development*' and would be a means of making '*the whole area of child-care more cohesive*'. The consultative document 'Towards a framework for Early Learning' was described variously as a valuable document, as reflecting '*good practice in all areas*', and as having included all the '*relevant information, themes, aims and goals*'. There was agreement with '*the identification and presentation of relationships, child-child and child-adult, as central to care, learning and development*'.

2. Concerns

While the overall response to the development of a framework was positive, a number of concerns were highlighted. 10% (6) of respondents feared that there might be an over-emphasis on learning and they stressed the importance of affording children the freedom to make their own choices, to have opportunities for free play and for socialising with their peers. Others were concerned that the development of a framework document could result in an increase in 'paperwork' if more time was devoted to planning, observation and assessment. The hope was expressed that all children could have the opportunity to avail of early childhood education, regardless of socio-economic circumstances.

3. Implementation

23% (14) of responses dealt with issues concerning the implementation of the framework. Many felt that if the framework was to be implemented successfully, then it would have to be funded adequately and an indication of the cost associated with this could should be given. There were suggestions that it should be piloted in a variety of child-care settings. Two respondents proposed that Government Departments, and in particular the Department of Education & Science and the Department of Health, should work together to support the education and care of children between 0 and 6 years. There was also a call for closer links to be established between pre-schools and primary schools so that all practitioners involved in the area of early learning could work as a team. It was emphasised that the approach adopted in the implementation of a framework should be a child-centred holistic one '*as the child must always be central*'.

4. Training

30% (18) respondents emphasised the need for comprehensive in-service training for practitioners, to assist in the full implementation of the framework. It was proposed

that parents and carers too should be supported and that plans should be put in place to ensure that the content of the framework could also be imparted to them. 8% (5) of the respondents emphasised that the support of parents, along with other adults, would be crucial for the successful implementation of the plan.

Recommendations

32% (19) of respondents made recommendations about what they would like to see included in the framework. A number of respondents suggested that it should be very specific in the presentation of strategies and techniques that could be employed by adults in its implementation. Others wanted activities outlined that could be used to develop the themes and felt that it *'must be explicit and detailed in its content'* and that examples of resources, songs, stories etc. should be included along with *'core knowledge and essential skills (as associated documents) for reference'*. One respondent was of the opinion that the framework should be extended to include the after-school setting. It was felt that the needs of children with special needs, the disadvantaged and non-nationals should be more explicitly featured and that the framework should ensure that all children are recognised as equals. The suggestion was made that a programme be developed that would assist practitioners in helping children with their moral and spiritual development. One key area of development that was perceived to have been omitted was that of physical development. It was also considered important that children should be consulted in the course of the process of drawing up the document.

Part 2: Nine key ideas

Key idea: A national framework

Table 3.1: Response to the development of a national framework

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	60.8%	62
Agree	39.2%	40
Disagree	0%	0
Strongly disagree	0%	0

Valid cases=102

Respondents displayed complete agreement with the idea of developing a national framework for early learning. While they reported their concerns and issues in the comment boxes, none disagreed with the idea of a national framework.

58 respondents chose to avail of the option to comment on the development of a national framework. They identified 2 main benefits of such a framework. 15 respondents (26%) saw the framework as a way of supporting early childhood as a time of great opportunity for all children. They believed this would contribute to the equality of opportunity for young children.

I think a national framework will promote better practice. It will give children better opportunity to learn at such an important time for learning. It will provide a good foundation for children which they will

carry through their life helping them become competent well adjusted adults.

...All children regardless of location have an equal right to access appropriate education. If we have a national framework we then have some way of ensuring equality and quality.

The second benefit of a national framework noted by respondents (21%) concerned the potential of this framework to contribute to greater co-ordination and coherence in the provision for children’s learning.

I feel that childcare providers will be able to provide a much more consistent approach to childcare by following a framework. We will be able to compare ideas and resources.

It’s important so all services in early childhood work to the same goal: the child learning through their setting.

Some respondents (14%) cautioned against equating co-ordination and coherence with uniformity and specification. Respondents emphasised the importance of the child being at the centre of the learning process and the adult’s responsibility to ensure that each child had opportunities to learn and to develop at his/her own pace and in response to his/her own needs. They suggested that this would help to celebrate, respect and build on the uniqueness of each child.

It [The framework] needs to be supportive rather than prescriptive.

Flexibility should be maintained.

In welcoming the development of a national framework, some respondents (21%) emphasised the necessity to resource the implementation of the framework. Two types of resources were identified. These included professional development for early years staff (14%), and financial assistance for early childhood settings (10%).

There is a need for high quality training in the 0-6 sector, and particularly specific training in the 0-3 group for practitioners.

My main concerns would be...whether any funding will be available to provide the resources necessary to carry out this curriculum.

This theme of resourcing the implementation of a national framework was identified in respondents’ comments on many other key ideas in the consultative document.

Key idea: Vision

The consultative document articulates a vision of all children learning and developing within trusting and loving relationships with others, and through meaningful engagement with their environments. The uniqueness of each child lies at the heart of this vision.

Table 3.2: Response to the vision

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	59%	59
Agree	40%	40
Disagree	1%	1
Strongly disagree	0%	0

Valid cases=100

Almost all respondents (99%) agreed with the vision for the framework. 47 commented on the content of the vision. Analysis of the comments highlighted three themes. The first theme related to the emphasis the vision placed on all children. The second theme was the role of parents/guardians and the third theme concerned resources.

Many respondents (34%) welcomed the vision's focus on **all** children.

It's [the vision] the ideal and a goal to work towards for all children for every age group.

They believed this emphasis on all children was important in the context of equality and diversity. In particular, respondents recognised the potential the vision had to support equality of opportunity for all children in early childhood, a theme identified in respondents' comments on the development of a national framework.

Important for all children to develop to their full potential in such an important time ...

Respondents also drew attention to the importance of the vision embracing and celebrating the diversity of early childhoods as experienced by children in Ireland.

This [vision] is timely given our multi-cultural society. We need to move away from historical tradition and embrace diversity.

The role of parents/guardians was identified as the second major theme in respondents' comments on the vision. In particular, respondents (17%) highlighted the necessity to support parents/guardians in their role as educators. This support could take the form of information, and/or training. Respondents believed this would help parents/guardians to make more positive contributions to their children's early learning.

...there needs to be a vast amount of information and training offered to parents...It will require a new approach of promoting positive parenting and parental responsibilities.

The third major theme in respondents' comments on the vision was the issue of resources. While welcoming the vision, a number of respondents (15%) questioned the capacity of the sector to make the vision a reality. They believed that investment at a national level was critical. As with respondents' comments on the development of a national framework, two types of resources were suggested? professional development for the adults working with the children, and financial support.

Provide informal inservice on same [vision].

Children will learn from this [vision]. More resources needed before this is achievable.

1 respondent noted the importance of government departments working together to make the vision a reality.

Key idea: Aims

The consultative document proposes four aims for the *Framework for Early Learning*. These concern the development of all children as competent and confident learners, the promotion of parents'/guardians' role as educators, supporting adults in planning and providing appropriate learning opportunities for all children, and the endorsement of existing good practices.

Table 3: Response to the aims

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	59%	59
Agree	40%	40
Disagree	0%	0
Strongly disagree	1%	1

Valid cases=100

Mirroring the positive response to the vision for the framework, 99% of respondents agreed with the proposed aims. 55 respondents gave more feedback through their comments.

Two main themes were identified in respondents' comments. These were parents/guardians and resources, reflecting themes noted in respondents' feedback on previous key ideas.

Many respondents (38%) noted parents'/guardians' important role in their children's early learning and development. Analysis of these comments revealed two sub-themes. Some respondents (16%) highlighted the necessity to provide support to parents/guardians in their role as educators. The respondents suggested that this support might include information on strategies for parents/guardians to use in helping their children to learn. It might also include information for practitioners on how to work more closely with parents/guardians and involve them more in their children's learning.

Additional support and education [needed] for parents in providing a solid base for learning in the early years.

While the significance of working in partnership with parents is recognised, guidance on how to do this in a meaningful way needs to be developed.

The second sub-theme in respondents' comments relating to parents/guardians concerned the practicalities of the role of educator for many parents/guardians. Respondents saw this role as presenting challenge for some parents/guardians.

The [framework's] aims are challenged by the need for parents to be absent for significant portions of their child's play and time due to economic demand.

The second main theme in respondents' comments on the proposed aims for the framework related to resources. Many respondents (35%) expressed concerns regarding the realization of the aims. They believed that 'resourcing' was key to this process.

Resources should be put in place that will enable these aims to become somewhat less aspirational and realizable.

In analysing respondents' references to resources, two types of resources were highlighted. These resources also featured in the comments on other key ideas such as the vision. Some respondents (22%) commented on the importance of professional development to facilitate the implementation of the framework.

Training is necessary for all practitioners and parents to work in partnership with one another.

Financial assistance was the second type of resource requested by respondents (15%).

I feel the aims are practical and achievable with the correct levels of funding.

Other forms of support for the realisation of the framework’s aims noted by individual respondents included detailed information about how the framework would be implemented, and what the role of various organisations and agencies might be in this implementation process. Inter-agency and inter-departmental co-ordination and co-operation were noted by two respondents as being critical to the fulfilment of the aims.

Key idea: Image of the child as a learner

The consultative document presents the child as an active learner, interacting and engaging with people, objects and events. Most children display a tremendous drive and capacity to learn from birth (Gopnik, Meltzoff and Kuhl, 1999). This is evident in their desire to become aware of and to understand the world, and everything in it. Playful interactions with appropriate involvement from others can support much learning which is self-initiated, fun, positive, and motivating. This image foregrounds the child’s own strengths and capacities as a learner and builds upon what he/she brings to the learning process.

Table 3.4: Response to the image of the child as a learner

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	53.1%	51
Agree	41.7%	40
Disagree	4.2%	4
Strongly disagree	1%	1

Valid cases=96

95% of respondents agreed with the image of the child as a learner as presented in the consultative document. 59 respondents provided more detailed feedback in their comments.

Many respondents (44%) referred to the active role of the child as a learner. Analysis of the comments revealed what the respondents believed to be important factors in supporting the child as an active learner. A quarter of respondents (25%) referred to the child’s interactions with the adult. They considered these interactions important for extending and enriching learning. They emphasised the quality of these interactions whereby the adult and child shared responsibility for the learning.

The interaction [with the adult] is very important as without it the child may not learn to the best of their ability.

By encouraging children to make own choices and decisions the adult shares power and control with the child.

20% of respondents noted the importance of peer-peer interactions in supporting the child as an active learner. A further 10% believed play was central in a child’s learning.

At this stage, children learn so much from their peers. They are particularly influenced by children slightly older as well.

Learning through play is the most positive and natural way for a child.

A second major theme in respondents' comments on the image of the child as a learner was resources. As with their responses to previous key ideas, two types were identified. 10% of respondents referred to the importance of professional development in enabling adults to support children as active learners. 5% of respondents highlighted time as a central resource in making the image of the child a reality. They considered the shortage of time to be a challenge.

...parents and many practitioners need help, training to ensure that children become active participants in their own learning.

You must be realistic in this idea [image]. You may have 16 children in a room. You can't have them all receiving one to one attention in adult child interactions.

A third theme in respondents' comments related to children with special educational needs. 16% of respondents believed the image presented difficulties in the context of these children. In particular, they believed that the image was less realistic for children with specific learning disabilities. They also emphasised that access to appropriately resourced care and education services at an early stage was critical for these children.

I agree [with the image] but for children with special educational needs, this is more difficult.

Children need to be able to access education. Those with special needs require special intervention from a range of professionals.

A final theme identified in respondents' comments related to parents/guardians. 9% of respondents referred to parents/guardians and the challenges the image of the child posed for them. The respondents commented that the image was idealistic as the busy lifestyle of parents/guardians prevented them from spending quality time with their children, echoing responses to the aims articulated for the *Framework for Early Learning*.

This is a false image. Parents are absent and have no quality time to interact with their children.

A further challenge noted by respondents was the absence of information available to parents/guardians to support them in their role as early educators. This challenge was also raised by respondents in their feedback on other key ideas.

Key idea: Thematic framework

The consultative document proposes a thematic framework which integrates learning in the various domains of children's development. The themes are: well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking. This thematic approach to learning seeks to promote the holistic development of all children. Adopting a whole child perspective, which the thematic approach enables, helps to foreground the child and his/her abilities, and highlights the interconnectedness of all learning.

Table 3.5: Response to a thematic framework

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	39.2%	38
Agree	55.7%	54
Disagree	3.1%	3
Strongly disagree	2.1%	2

Valid cases=97

Almost 95% of respondents either ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with the thematic approach for presenting learning in a national framework. In contrast to responses to previous key ideas, a higher percentage of respondents chose ‘agree’ than ‘strongly agree’. A total of 54 respondents gave additional comments. These comments focused on the desirability of the thematic approach. Respondents also suggested amendments or additions to the four themes.

Almost half of the respondents who added comments used these comments to welcome in varying degrees, the proposed thematic approach.

I like the idea of learning through these themes and think it is very useful.

Before I read the document I was unsure about these themes, however having read it, I strongly agree. Well done!!

There was a small number (12%) among those who provided comments who favoured a developmental domain approach, noting that many practitioners already used this approach. The curriculum areas in the Primary School Curriculum (1999a) are also based on developmental domains.

On the other hand, some respondents commented on the potential of a thematic approach to forge links across much curriculum guidance. Other benefits of a thematic framework noted by respondents included the potential to support a common language among those working with young children and the flexibility within themes enabling their adaptation and mediation at local level.

Specific themes operated nationwide. All pre schools on same wavelength regarding themes as in national schools.

Creates focus for carer but not too restrictive so able to adapt for a group of children.

1 respondent noted that the themes could have a positive influence on the lives of adults who work with children. He/she suggested that adults could learn much about looking after their own well-being, taking time for rest and relaxation:

The themes suggested are excellent and would also present a positive way for parents to consider their own learning as parents while parenting.

4 respondents expressed initial doubt regarding the capacity of a thematic approach to capture the full extent and range of children’s learning and development. However, the consultative document seems to have identified the links between themes and domains sufficiently to allay these concerns. For example:

Felt some resistance at the beginning as a little vague, but do accept it when viewed in light of what developmental areas each theme covers.

Some respondents (18%) also referred to the content of specific themes. For example, some felt that the child as a contributor, and a participant in learning, wasn’t captured in the themes. The addition of a fifth theme was suggested.

While the four themes are clear "contribution of the child" has been omitted from the framework model.

The importance of highlighting care throughout the themes was also a concern for some respondents (8%).

Key idea: The adult’s role

The consultative document emphasises the social nature of early learning:

...we have begun to think again of the child as a social being—one who plays and talks with others, learns through interactions with parents/guardians and teachers...through social life, the child acquires a framework for integrating experience, and learning how to negotiate meaning...

(Bruner and Haste, 1987, p.1).

The document presents a proactive role for the adult in enriching and extending the child’s learning. This role is premised on the understanding that *adults have the power to make a major difference to children’s lives and their development by what they offer to children and by how they behave towards them* (Lindon, 1993, p.75).

Table 3.6: Response to the adult’s role

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	59.6%	59
Agree	35.4%	35
Disagree	4%	4
Strongly disagree	1%	1

Valid cases=99

The image of the adult’s role as outlined in the consultative document met with agreement by 95% of respondents. 60 respondents provided more detailed feedback on the role through their comments.

In expressing support for the adult’s role, many respondents (50%) drew attention to what they considered to be important aspects of this role:

- ‘matching’ learning opportunities with the child’s interests, strengths and needs
- sharing with children in their learning
- promoting play as a learning process
- scaffolding the child’s learning through skilful interventions
- offering praise and encouragement
- using the outdoor environment as a resource for learning.

The aspects are presented above in order of frequency in respondents’ comments beginning with the most frequently cited.

Every child is different and comes from different cultures and backgrounds so everyone has different needs. Adults have to adopt their curriculum to suit.

Adults need to share control with children and be authentic with children.

Extremely important to have good quality interactions during play. Not just enough for the children to be looked after but their play has to be extended and developed by qualified staff.

Resourcing was again a major theme in 27% of respondents' comments. Detailed analysis of the comments showed that 22% of respondents considered professional development to be a critical resource in enabling adults' to fulfil the role outlined for them in the consultative document.

Adult training must be undertaken in conjunction with the development of a framework for early learning.

5% of respondents cited financial assistance as an important resource in supporting adults in their role in early learning, while a further 3% referred to the shortage of time.

Parents/guardians emerged again as a key theme in 23% of respondents' comments on the adult's role. 2 main ideas were identified in the analysis of their comments. 10% of respondents highlighted parents'/guardians' role as their children's first and primary educators. A further 8% noted the necessity to provide supports such as training and information to parents/guardians to enable them to fulfil their role more effectively.

Parents are the child's first teachers.

Adults [Parents] need ready access to both parenting programmes and to reflective sessions on their strengths and skills. Some of our parents have requested 'drop-in centres' and parenting information to be made available.

Challenges in fulfilling the adult's role was the fourth main theme in respondents' comments with more than a fifth (22%) referring to these challenges. The challenge noted most often (10% of respondents) related to the uniqueness of each child and the difficulties this presented for the adult in responding to his/her individual needs.

The challenge the adult faces in this role in supporting the child, encouraging and working on the child's ability, then planning for the next stage as all children differ. Each will have to be supported appropriately.

7% of respondents commented on the challenge for the adult to facilitate and support learning rather than direct it. A further 3% cited the shortage of time as a significant challenge for adults in filling the role as articulated in the consultative document.

Key idea: The role of assessment

The consultative document highlights the valuable educational potential of assessment in supporting and extending children's early learning. Assessment provides the adult with the knowledge to recognise and celebrate the child's progress, and to plan for and support his/her learning in the most appropriate manner. Assessment should primarily be an informal routine part of day-to-day interactions and observations contributing to individually responsive learning experiences for children that are meaningful and relevant.

Table 3.7: Response to the role of assessment

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
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Strongly agree	46.4%	45
Agree	48.5%	47
Disagree	5.2%	5
Strongly disagree	0%	0

Valid cases=97

While the role of assessment received an overall positive reaction with 95% of respondents expressing agreement with it, it is interesting to note that slightly more responses were weighted towards 'agree' than 'strongly agree'. This, like the responses to the idea of a thematic framework, contrasted with responses to other key ideas.

68 respondents provided comments on the role of assessment as presented in the consultative document. This was the highest frequency of comments across all nine key ideas. Four major themes were identified in respondents' comments: the benefits of assessment, the challenges posed by assessment, professional development, and the term 'assessment'.

Many respondents (47%) noted the positive contribution assessment can make to supporting each child to realise his/her potential.

You learn what stage a child is at, by assessing and observing you can see what stage they are at and plan to extend their learning.

Expanding on this benefit of assessment, respondents focused on the importance of assessment in the identification of children with special educational needs. A fifth of respondents (21%) noted the necessity to provide these children with the necessary supports and resources to enable them to learn and to develop to their full potential.

Assessment is important to detect any problems early, to nurture and be supportive in the development of the children.

While 95% of respondents agreed with the role of assessment, many (43%) of those who provided comments drew attention to what they considered to be the challenges posed by assessment. These challenges included the danger of assessment leading to premature judgements about children, the time required to assess, the appropriateness of the assessment processes, and the possibility of assessment 'narrowing' learning for children.

A more detailed analysis of the data on the challenges of assessment showed that some respondents (13%) were wary of assessment leading to inaccurate judgements about children and their learning. Respondents feared that children would be labelled at an early age having a negative impact on their future learning.

Unprofessional assessment can lead to situations where children are labelled at an early age, to the long term detriment of their development.

In commenting on the time factor associated with assessment, some respondents (9%) noted the challenges that practitioners face in making time available for assessing and for recording information gleaned through assessment processes.

Can be extremely time consuming and staff numbers cannot always accommodate this...Staff are stretched...they do not have time for observing each child and assessing his/her learning.

6% of respondents referred to the appropriateness of assessment practices and tools. They stated that these should reflect the child’s developmental stage, and that they should lead to reliable and valid information about the child.

...the assessment processes themselves must be developmentally appropriate, authentic, and reliable and validated...

A further 4% of respondents commented on the danger of assessment ‘narrowing’ early learning for children. They believed that this was particularly inappropriate at this stage in a child’s life.

In keeping with feedback on other key ideas in the consultative document, 21% of respondents called for professional development, the third main theme in the comments on assessment.

Assessment is a process which requires a high level of skill and training.

Some respondents believed that this professional development was critical in helping adults to make accurate and informed assessments of children, and in helping them to use this information effectively in providing future learning opportunities.

The fourth major theme identified in respondents’ comments concerned the term ‘assessment’. 10% of respondents believed that the term was unhelpful in promoting the importance of assessment. They suggested that it presented assessment as being formal and somewhat negative.

...I would prefer the word review. Assessment conjures up for me a measure of passing or failing...

Respondents suggested alternative terms including ‘observation’, ‘monitoring’ and ‘review’.

Key idea: Contents of the framework

The consultative document proposes that the *Framework for Early Learning* should include various information such as its vision and aims, its philosophical and value base, the principles which underpin how children’s early learning should be supported, advice on assessing and planning for children’s learning, learning presented through themes, and guidance on developing partnerships between parents/guardians and childminders/practitioners.

Table 3.8: Response to the contents of the framework

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	44.8%	43
Agree	53.1%	51
Disagree	2.1%	2
Strongly disagree	0%	0

Valid cases=96

98% of respondents welcomed the suggested contents. A total of 49 respondents added additional comments. Three key themes addressed in the comments were the usefulness of the proposed contents, the appropriateness and accessibility of guidance for parents/guardians, and the supports required for the implementation of the framework.

Among the comments, some respondents (25%) noted reasons for their approval of the proposed contents. For example:

I think the proposed contents would help me in providing appropriate learning experiences for all children. If these proposed contents are put in place for us in the very beginning it will work.

However, some respondents emphasised the need to ensure that the content was developmentally appropriate according to the needs of the child. This would require the development of the framework and all its contents in a manner which reflected both theory and practice in early childhood settings. This mirrored respondents' comments on assessment practices and tools.

I agree strongly with the suggested contents of the framework and would see the adult's role as central. However the content must be appropriate to the developmental age and stage of children 0-6 years. This means founding the content clearly in developmentally appropriate practice for this age group with specific strategies, based on child psychology and tested in the field.

A number of comments (15%) focused on the accessibility of the framework, particularly for parents/guardians. This might involve developing materials specifically for parents/guardians:

I would like to see provision made for parents and perspective parents to be taught how to support their children

Others, however, felt that the needs of parents/guardians could be so diverse as to render the provision of a common set of materials ineffective:

Parents from different backgrounds would have various expectations and therefore as a teacher [I feel it] would prove impossible to meet everyone's needs...

Almost a third of the comments addressed concerns relating to the implementation of the proposed contents of the *Framework for Early Learning*. Some respondents called for information on the implementation process. This information should address not only the roles and responsibilities of adults working with children, but government departments, agencies and organisations.

The framework needs to also contain methodologies on HOW it can be implemented, resourced, monitored and evaluated, especially for parents and family carers, as well as those working professionally in the area.

This request echoed comments on other key ideas.

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

The consultative document proposes a model for presenting the child's learning in the framework. This model sees learning presented using four themes. Each theme has a set of aims. Each aim in turn is sub-divided into learning goals. Suggestions for learning experiences to assist the child in working towards these goals are also given. Some exemplars of good practices are included to demonstrate more clearly how the adult can support the individual child in his/her learning.

Table 3.9: Response to the model for presenting the child’s learning

Level of agreement	Response rate	n
Strongly agree	41.1%	39
Agree	53.7%	51
Disagree	2.1%	2
Strongly disagree	3.2%	3

Valid cases=95

As with other key ideas, there was a high level of agreement with the proposed model (95%). Like the responses to the ideas of a ‘thematic framework’ and the ‘role of assessment’, more respondents expressed ‘agreement’ than ‘strong agreement’. A total of 50 respondents added additional comments. For the most part, these comments dealt with the appropriateness of the proposed model, and the challenges involved in ensuring the model reflected the needs of parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners.

Many (25%) of the comments made some reference to the usefulness of the model.

I don’t think there are any changes I would make to this model as I feel it covers all and is extremely useful.

However, a small number of respondents (5%) indicated their opposition to the model. Some objected on the grounds that the model was vague and imprecise. For example:

The suggested model is an ideological and metaphysical construct immune to testing and incapable of definitive validation.

Not very useful. It’s impractical and way too idealistic. It is unfounded and not in touch with reality. The situations in schools and creches are much different to those mentioned in the exemplars.

Other respondents felt that the model was at odds with developmentally appropriate practices.

...The use of the words “themes, aims and goals” within a framework for young children’s care, learning and development is developmentally inappropriate. I fear that the framework and its translation in practice will become goal orientated with suggested learning experiences becoming prescribed adult planned and directed learning activities...

Over half of the comments referred to various issues to be considered in the development of the framework. These included the use of the model for planning, and the ability of all adults but in particular parents/guardians, to use it in supporting children in their learning.

Guidance would be needed on how the framework would fit with daily activities, in other words, how the aims, goals, learning experiences would be reflected in the practitioner’s daily activities. Templates would be needed to show it works in reality.

The model sounds very good for children. My concerns as already stated are the education of parents to carry out this task.

Respondents commented on what they perceived as being the strengths and weaknesses of the exemplars within the model. These comments referred to their content and usefulness.

The four themes are all-embracing in terms of holistic development. However I feel that all adults even those working with small children do not fully understand the thematic concept. In this regard the exemplars need further attention and need to be more focused and specific.

Don't forget to keep to what the practitioner will be doing day to day such as giving the examples of everyday themes things that will help carry out the main aims.

Would it be useful to highlight strategies or specific techniques that the adults can use in the exemplar, especially when a more supportive role is appropriate for the adults?

Conclusion

Respondents expressed a high level of agreement with all nine key ideas presented in the consultative document. In providing comments on the different ideas, respondents frequently endorsed the content of the consultative document. They also made suggestions for, and raised some concerns regarding, the development and implementation of the *Framework for Early Learning*. The analysis of the response form data highlighted the recurrence of a number of themes across the nine key ideas. These themes included implementation, parents/guardians, professional development and resources.

Section 5 of the report considers the findings from the response forms in conjunction with those from the other consultation activities. It outlines some areas and issues which may require further consideration and discussion in moving forward in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.

SECTION 4: FINDINGS FROM REGIONAL SEMINARS, BRIEFINGS, WRITTEN SUBMISSIONS, INVITATIONAL SEMINAR

Introduction

This section of the report presents an analysis of findings from the regional seminars, the briefing meetings, the written submissions received, and the invitational seminar which was held in December 2004. As in section 3, these findings are presented according to the nine key ideas. The findings present a range of viewpoints, concerns and suggestions. Where broad agreement on ideas was identified, this is noted.

Like section 3 of the report, this section is presented in two parts.

- Part 1 provides an overview of the regional seminars and the briefing meetings in terms of the numbers organised, the geographical location of these and the numbers attending. Details of those organisations and individuals who made submissions are provided, and some detail is provided on the delegates who attended the invitational seminar.
- Part 2 describes the initial findings from the data generated and collected at the seminars and briefings, and from the submissions received. The findings are presented according to emerging key themes.

Analysis of findings

Part 1: Profile of participants

Regional seminars and briefing meetings

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 present an overview of the regional seminars and the briefing meetings in terms of the number of events organised, and the number of attendees at each of these.

Table 4.1: Regional seminars

Date (2004)	Location	Venue	Attendees
08/06	Dublin	Red Cow Moran's Hotel	48
09/06	Galway	Galway Bay Hotel	45
10/06	Cork	Silver Springs Moran's Hotel	46
17/06 *	Carlow	Dolmen Hotel	42
22/06	Carrickmacross, Monaghan	Nuremore Hotel	16
Total attendees			197

* This regional seminar was organised, hosted and funded by Carlow County Childcare Committee. Two NCCA staff led the seminar.

Table 4.2: Briefing meetings

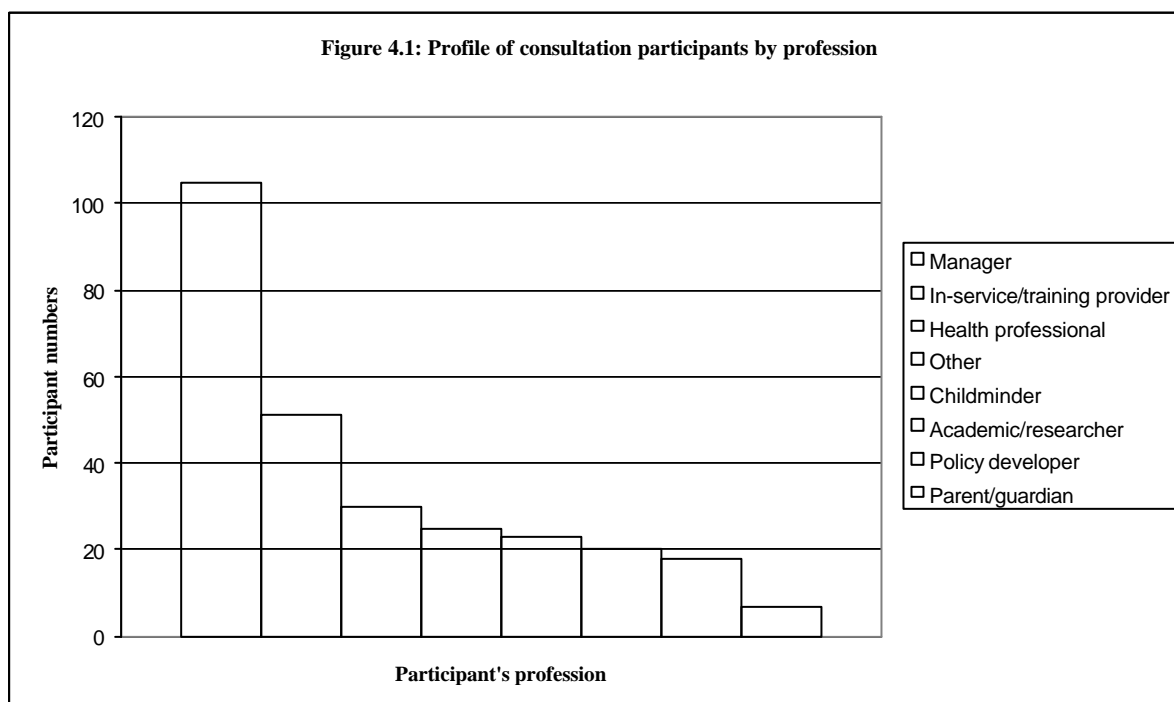
Date (2004)	Location	Organisation	Attendees
08/05	Limerick	Irish Preschool Playgroup Association (Annual conf.)	80* 21**
31/05	Leitrim	Border Counties Childcare Network	150* 18 **
07/06	Dublin	National Children's Nurseries Association	9
11/06	Tralee	Partnership Trá Lí	11
15/06	Dublin	Dublin Institute of Technology	38
21/06	Tipperary	North Tipperary County Childcare Committee	70
22/06	Waterford	Waterford City Childcare Committee	42
29/06	Dublin	Forbairt Naíonraí Teo	10
30/06	Dublin	Dublin Inner City Partnership, Inner City Childcare Network	17
13/07	Dublin	National Disability Authority	35
27/08	Galway	Irish National Teachers' Organisation, Central Executive Committee	32
06/09	Dublin	Ballymun Partnership	9
06/10	Dublin	Association of Montessori Teachers in Ireland (AMI)	3
Total attendees			506***

* Conference

** Workshop

*** In calculating the total number of attendees at the briefing meetings, the conference attendance numbers were used in the case of the conferences on the 8th and 31st May.

Figure 4.1 presents a summary of attendance data for the regional seminars and the briefing meetings.



Written submissions

Table 4.3 lists the organisations and individuals who made submissions to the NCCA on its consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*. In compiling their submissions, many of the above organisations organised and facilitated consultations with their own members. In some instances, this involved funding and hosting regional meetings and focus group discussions. Information gleaned in this manner was then used in compiling the written submissions. The submissions may be accessed on the NCCA website at www.ncca.ie.

Table 4.3: Written submissions received

Organisations/individuals who made submissions
Border Counties Childcare Network
Combat Poverty Agency
Cork Early Years Network, Cork City Partnership Ltd.
Development Co-operation Ireland (Dept. of Foreign Affairs)
Donegal County Childcare Committee Ltd.
Forbairt Naíonraí Teo
IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation***
Humanist Association of Ireland
Irish National Teachers' Organisation
LifeStart Donegal
Limerick City Childcare Committee
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick
National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education
National Childminding Association of Ireland
National Children's Nurseries Association
National Children's Office
Pavee Point Travellers Centre
Planning and Evaluation – Children and Family Services
Pre School Inspection and Information Services, Child Care Directorate, Mid-Western Health Board
Trócaire
Waterford City and County Childcare Committees (joint submission)
Ms. Anne Hourihane, Clinical Nurse Specialist, Community Early Services, St. Vincent's Centre
Ms. Philomena Donnelly, Lecturer in Early Childhood Education, St. Patrick's College
Feedback from Border Counties Childcare Network*
Feedback from National Children's Nurseries Association*
Total number of submissions received
23

* IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, the Border Counties Childcare Network and the National Children's Nurseries Association forwarded feedback from regional meetings with their members, in addition to making organisational submissions.

Invitational seminar

The invitational seminar was held in Dublin Castle on December 9th. The NCCA offered 80 places by invitation in advance to various organisations in early childhood care and education. There were presentations by NCCA staff on the findings from the consultation to date. There were two keynote speakers: (1) Dr. Nóirín Hayes, DIT,

Rathmines whose address was entitled ‘The Language of Early Childhood Education’ (2) Dr. Francis Douglas, UCC who spoke on ‘The Power of Play.’ Nóirín Hayes spoke about the dichotomy between education and care and considered how the language used can illustrate this. Francis Douglas spoke about the centrality of play in children’s lives and in enabling the child to develop and learn physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially.

After each keynote address, participants broke into groups to discuss a number of questions related to the keynote presentations and the consultative document. There were four groups, each led by a facilitator. These questions were designed to pick up on ideas raised in the keynotes, and to prompt further discussion on the ideas in the consultative document. The proceedings concluded with a panel discussion. The panel comprised the keynote speakers and NCCA personnel, and it was chaired by Liz Dunphy (who was the chair of the Early Childhood Technical Working Group). Table 4.4 shows the profile of the 80 participants at the invitational seminar.

Table 4.4 Profile of participants at the invitational seminar

Organisation	Representatives
County Childcare Committees	23
Practitioners/teachers/lecturers	22
National organisations and networks	18
National policy developers	10
Health Boards	8
Total	80

Part 2: Analysis of data on nine key ideas

Key idea: A national framework

There was a strong welcome among those who participated at meetings or made a submission, for the development of a national framework to support children in their learning. While concerns relating to the framework were expressed, and challenges were identified, the sector highlighted a number of benefits pertaining to a national framework. These benefits related to the status and importance associated with learning in early childhood, the creation of a shared vision in supporting all children in their learning, and the potential to invigorate renewed thinking about professional development for those working in the sector. This endorsement for the framework was accompanied by the identification of a number of challenges.

Status of early learning

Many participants in the consultation drew attention to the potential of a national framework to raise the status of early learning in Ireland, and to make early learning a ‘*mainstream*’ issue. First and foremost, they considered the framework to be important in supporting the interests of children by valuing children as citizens in their own right as well as in terms of their future potential. Particular attention was given to the birth to three years age group in light of care traditionally being viewed

and accepted as being more important than learning for children of this age. Many participants considered a national framework to be an important step forward in raising public awareness of the first years in a child's life as the basis for all later learning, and for supporting adults in identifying and building on opportunities for learning at this stage in a child's life. It is interesting to note that while there was broad agreement on the importance of these first years for laying the foundations for later learning, a small number of participants questioned the use of the term 'learning' when referring to children from birth. In this case, some participants considered 'development' to be a more appropriate and all embracing term.

Linked to the potential of a national framework to increase the status of early learning, was a discussion on the benefits of early learning and the importance of raising public awareness of these. Some participants in the consultation drew attention to the importance of early learning from a social and economic perspective, as highlighted in the OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood Education and Care Policy (2004).

Improvement in quality

Participants in the consultation noted the potential of a national framework to support improvement in the quality of the provision for children's early learning. In particular, they highlighted the current diversity and fragmentation of early childhood care and education in Ireland, contributed to by the absence of a national framework.

There was strong agreement across the early childhood sector that a national framework would contribute to the creation of a shared vision and purpose for parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners in supporting children in their early learning. This shared vision could be instrumental in encouraging and enabling adults to engage in more reflective practice, to recognize the strengths and weaknesses in their practices and to identify the next steps in improving those practices. Additionally, participants highlighted that much good practice already exists across the early childhood sector. They stressed that it would be important for a national framework to take account of this and build on it. The framework could be an important vehicle for validating adults' work in supporting children in their early learning, and for sharing good practices. Such activities should lead to improved quality in provision for children's learning.

Some participants identified a national framework as an important benchmark for external monitoring in the context of improvement in quality.

Continuity and progression

Participants in the consultation saw the development of a national framework as being critical in supporting a continuum of learning from birth to six years. They stressed the importance of creating continuity in children's learning through early childhood. Children may spend time in a variety of settings other than their own home in the first six years of life. This range of experiences, while having enormous potential to be enriching for the child's learning, can create discontinuities in learning. It was suggested that guidelines were required on how best the progression from one adult to another could be supported.

Parents/guardians as primary educators

Parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners stressed the importance of supporting parents/guardians in their role as early educators. A national framework for early learning was considered to be an opportune way for disseminating information and advice to parents/guardians to inform them how they might support their children in learning through everyday routines and practices and through the provision of particular types of experiences during the early years. As outlined later in the context of the key ideas 'Aims' and 'Contents of the framework', consultation participants recognised the development and dissemination of relevant and accessible guidance for parents/guardians as being challenging.

Professional development

A wide variety of professional development and training programmes is availed of by those working in the early childhood sector. Throughout the consultation, participants highlighted the fact that the sector, outside the formal education system, was operating from a low base of training. Participants emphasized the need to support the professional development of those currently working in the sector. They identified a national framework for early learning as an important lever for the professionalisation of the sector as a whole. They saw this focus on professional development involving activities such as reviewing training practices and programmes, mapping career pathways and ring-fencing appropriate resources to support adults in continuing their own learning in the field of early childhood education. Participants considered professional development to be pivotal to the implementation of the framework.

Inclusive framework

There was broad agreement among participants that a national framework for early learning should not become a prescribed curriculum or '*definitive*'. There was concern regarding the potential of a national framework to '*direct*' learning in a way which could result in learning being narrowed and stunted. While participants considered it important to work towards common goals in supporting learning at this stage, they argued that a national framework should be sufficiently open, flexible and dynamic to cater for the uniqueness of each child. A framework of this nature could guide the adult in terms of what learning is important (dispositions, attitudes, skills and knowledge) and how that learning can be supported appropriately for each child, while respecting the integrity of each child as a person with particular strengths, abilities, interests and needs. This would ensure that decisions regarding learning activities and experiences were made in partnership between the adult and the child, enabling the curriculum to remain child-centred and child-led, whilst being guided by principles of good practice.

Participants also noted the necessity for a national framework to accommodate diversity. This diversity emanates from the eclectic mix of philosophies and traditions which inform adults in supporting children in their learning. There is also great diversity in respect of the types of settings children may spend time in during early childhood. An open, flexible framework based on principles of good practice could embrace such diversity.

It is important to recognize the importance that discussions or descriptions of the framework should not exclude any child. Thus, where the consultative document refers to diversity in terms of religion, it is important to also acknowledge that there are children who do not have any religion and that their cultural values and needs should also be recognised and met. References to diversity of religion should also include references to no religion for those children of no religion.

Consultation participants addressed the framework's content. They broadly agreed that a national framework for early learning should address a broad range of learning content. They considered it critical that this content was concerned with dispositions to be nurtured, attitudes and skills to be developed, and knowledge to be shared. Such content should be engaging and meaningful to children and relevant to their lives. In this way, the learning content of the framework would be developmentally appropriate for children as they progressed through early childhood.

Implementation

Participants frequently identified sustained long-term investment in early childhood care and education as being pivotal to the implementation of the framework. Current funding levels across the sector and the short-term nature of much of that funding can impede the improvement of practice through, for example, a lack of physical resources and opportunities to engage in professional development. There were clear signals from participants that funding levels would need to be reviewed and increased.

A second concern expressed by participants relating to implementation focused on the external monitoring of the framework. There are currently different monitoring/inspection arrangements depending on the setting. Infant classes in primary schools are inspected by the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Science, while centre-based settings outside primary schools, are inspected by Pre-school Inspectors of the Department of Health and Children. Not only are different government departments involved in the inspection process, but there are different foci in the inspection process across the two departments. Practitioners working outside infant classrooms warned against the emergence of a dual inspection system whereby settings would be required to undergo two inspections, one by each government department.

A third concern raised regarding the implementation of the framework was the apparent lack of inter-agency and inter-departmental co-operation. Many government departments and agencies have a responsibility for aspects of early childhood care and education. There was broad agreement among participants in the consultation that inter-agency and inter-departmental co-operation was critical to a national framework being implemented successfully and ultimately making a positive contribution to children's experiences in early childhood. One group of participants believed that one agency or department should be established that would have responsibility for overseeing both the care and education of young children rather than having this responsibility split between two government departments as it exists at present.

Language

There were some suggestions during the consultation that the title of the framework should be amended. Proposals made included; '*A Framework for Early Care and Development*', '*A Framework for Early Childhood Care and Education*' and '*A Framework for Early Childhood Care, Education and Learning*'. Participants considered these titles would reflect more accurately the needs of children from birth to six years. This suggestion highlights the care/education dichotomy and the learning/development debate, both of which emerged in the consultation in the context of other key ideas such as 'A thematic framework' and 'A model for presenting learning'. Some participants also believed that terminology such as '*education*' and '*curriculum*', which people may associate with formal schooling, should be avoided. It was also proposed that what is meant by learning should be defined and clarified.

Key idea: Vision

Participants in the consultation supported the vision articulated for the framework. They considered it '*worthy*' and '*appropriate*' for a national framework concerned with children's learning from birth to six years. There was particular welcome for the centrality afforded to relationships and the environment as important contexts for early learning. Support for the vision nonetheless was coupled with concern for its realisation, a point expanded in detail below under the theme of 'Implementation'.

Not surprisingly, there was much overlap in participants' feedback on the two key ideas of a national framework and the vision presented for that framework. In particular, participants welcomed the focus on the early years as an important time for learning and developing as individuals. They also endorsed the emphasis the vision places on the individuality and uniqueness of each child.

Inclusion

The importance of *all* children having positive and meaningful learning opportunities in early childhood featured frequently in discussions and submissions. The vision outlined for the framework places particular importance on enabling all children to realise their individual potential through purposeful and engaging experiences. Some participants in the consultation felt the consultative document was articulating a framework for the 'typically developing child'. Such a framework they suggested would not support families with children with certain learning disabilities. Similar concerns are reported in the findings on the idea of a national framework. Other participants suggested that the vision should embrace the principle of cultural diversity more explicitly. This was considered particularly important given Ireland's culturally diverse population, and the body of research documenting the early years as a critical time in laying the foundations for respecting and understanding difference as a natural part of life. Some participants considered the development of a national framework to provide an opportunity to focus on the development of skills among adults working with children which would enable the adults to challenge negative attitudes which children may experience in their daily lives.

Equality of access

The consultative document presents a vision of all children being supported appropriately in their early learning. While there is universal provision for children from four years of age within infant classes in primary schools, this is not the case for children younger than this. Participants in the consultation argued that a national framework for the whole early childhood period should not be seen as being synonymous with equality of access to early education. This access should be the right of all children irrespective of geographical location, parents'/guardians' financial circumstances or the presence/absence of community or voluntary groups locally.

Philosophical underpinning

The vision for the *Framework for Early Learning* is underpinned largely by an understanding of learning and development which places the adult in a critical role in enabling and supporting children to learn beyond their developmental capacities. Participants in the consultation requested that the NCCA would make the philosophical approach(es) underpinning the framework explicit. There were some suggestions that this should support the articulation of a set of overarching principles with these principles leading the development of the content of the framework. These principles, as well as drawing on theories of learning and development, would reflect the values of society and national aspirations for young learners. This suggestion received particular attention at the regional seminars and in the written submissions. Participants outlined how articulating the framework's guiding philosophy would provide insights into the importance of certain pedagogical approaches with children from birth to six years. Furthermore, it could contribute to the development of a shared understanding of how children learn in early childhood and how they can be supported in this learning.

Implementation

Some participants requested the inclusion of an implementation plan in the framework itself. There was strong agreement that without clearly defined and agreed commitments at a national level coupled with the allocation of appropriate levels of resources and supports, the vision was likely to remain aspirational and idealistic.

Throughout the consultation, parents/guardians as a group received specific attention in the context of the realisation of the vision. Participants spoke of the challenges faced by many parents/guardians in fulfilling their role as early educators – challenges made more acute by poverty and low levels of educational attainment. There was broad agreement that if the vision was to be realised, significant investment in parenting programmes, family/home-based interventions, and the sharing of information and guidance would be required. This was seen as being particularly important in the context of children under three years of age as a large percentage of these children continue to spend most of their time in home settings.

Refinement of vision

Suggestions for refining the vision for the framework included:

- adding references to ‘play’ and discovery’ which are critical in facilitating early learning.
- making explicit references to the interdependent nature of care and education in early childhood. Participants emphasised the importance of this both in the refinement of the vision and also throughout the framework as it is developed.
- referring to the two official languages of the State.
- incorporating a stronger emphasis on development education which would help to ensure a global and justice perspective in children’s early learning.
- amending the phrase ‘they develop as learners’ to ‘they develop as people’.

Key idea: Aims

Similar to participants’ responses to the vision, there was broad agreement with and support for the four aims presented for the framework. Participants were particularly pleased with the importance accorded to parents/guardians as early educators. They also welcomed the explicit references to childminders as a group of adults who play a key role in supporting children in their early learning. This was considered important as many childminders may not ‘recognise’ themselves within an umbrella term such as ‘practitioners’. Participants also welcomed the acknowledgement of the range and body of good practices that currently exist in the early childhood sector in Ireland. They emphasised the importance of the *Framework for Early Learning* building on these.

Accessibility

Throughout the consultation, participants expressed concern regarding the accessibility of the framework for parents/guardians. They saw this as highly challenging given that many children particularly those in the birth to three years age group spend most of their time in the home setting with parents/guardians or extended family. Making the framework accessible to parents/guardians was seen as critical if they are to be supported in their role as early educators and if children are to have purposeful, positive and enjoyable learning experiences from birth.

Accessibility of the framework for parents/guardians was explored as a two-pronged issue: suitability of content and dissemination of the framework. Many participants called on the NCCA to ensure that the language register of the framework and the types of information it might contain were suitable for parents/guardians. They recommended that the framework should distinguish between the qualitatively different roles played by parents/guardians and by childminders/practitioners in children’s lives. Participants also emphasised the importance of the framework in demonstrating the role of practitioners as being complementary to that of parents/guardians. Specific attention was given to the critical importance of the suitability of content in the framework for parents/guardians of children with special educational needs, where the level of the child’s need is experienced as challenging for families. Participants questioned how the framework might be disseminated to parents/guardians. They suggested exploring maternity hospitals and the public health

nurse network as potential distribution points, in conjunction with having the framework available on-line.

Realisation of aims

In planning ahead for the implementation of the *Framework for Early Learning*, the National Children's Office suggested that the six operational principles of the National Children's Strategy (2000) might be considered in realising the aims of the framework. These principles comprise

- child-centred
- family oriented
- equitable
- inclusive
- action oriented
- integrated.

The consultative document identifies a number of principles of early learning drawn from an extensive body of research, which will inform and guide the development of the framework. The principles of the National Children's Strategy could provide a guiding framework for the implementation plan as requested by participants in the consultation.

Continuity and consistency

The consultative document discusses the importance of ensuring links between the *Framework for Early Learning* and the Primary School Curriculum (1999a). These links should facilitate continuity and progression in children's learning across early childhood, helping children to learn to their true potential. Early Start and Infant teachers in particular noted the similarity between the aims presented for the framework and those of the Early Start Intervention Project (1998) and the Primary School Curriculum. They suggested that the aims articulated for the framework may be more relevant in the context of children aged from 3-6 years. This suggestion links with the concerns regarding how parents/guardians can be supported in their role as educators especially in the first three years of a child's life when many children do not attend out-of-home settings.

Refinement of aims

As with the vision for the framework, participants in the consultation recommended some changes to the aims. These included:

- acknowledging the importance of adult-adult relationships in supporting children in their learning. Participants endorsed the prominence given to the child-adult relationship in the aims, but considered it necessary to include adult-adult relationships such as parent/guardian – childminder/practitioner relationships.
- understanding the child as a person living and learning within a community which shares a culture, language, heritage and traditions. Some participants suggested that it would be important for the framework's aims to refer to the importance of understanding, respecting and building on these 'home'

experiences enabling continuity and progression in the child's learning between home and out-of-home settings.

- emphasising the importance of good parenting skills in supporting early learning.

Key idea: Image of the child as a learner

Participants in the consultation expressed strong agreement with the image of the child as an active learner, interacting and engaging with people, objects and events. There was broad agreement with a child-centred holistic approach to learning with the adult being a central partner in supporting and enriching this learning, and with play being used as a powerful context for enabling the learning. Participants stressed that in order to realise this image through the implementation of the framework, funding and supports would be necessary, both to purchase appropriate equipment and materials, and to accommodate the training of adults.

Play

Play was frequently highlighted as a powerful and valuable context of early learning for children. In particular, participants indicated strong agreement about play's crucial role in enabling the child to develop and learn physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially. The benefits of play in helping children develop problem-solving skills, social skills, improving concentration, aiding physical development and assisting with language development were specifically mentioned. Play was also seen to allow children to get involved at whatever level is appropriate for them at any given time. However, it was stressed that these benefits could only be accrued from play that is interesting to the child. Learning was deemed more likely to occur if it is built upon the interests and strengths of the child, thus providing intrinsic motivation. As there are many different types of play, it was suggested that children should be afforded ample opportunity to experience a wide variety of forms of play, including reality play, free play and play using outdoor facilities. Some participants felt that outdoor play, in appropriate surroundings and under appropriate adult supervision, was not always given the priority it needs. Such play can provide children with opportunities to explore with a range of challenging equipment and to safely experience a degree of risk-taking. It was suggested that strategies should be developed so that carers would not be inhibited by the risks involved in facilitating play outdoors. It was proposed that issues of diversity could be explored through the medium of play, leading to situations that could develop young children's understanding of the unfairness of exclusion, inequalities and prejudice. Participants understood the child to derive most benefit from learning through play situations/scenarios structured by the adult, although it was suggested that a balance between adult-initiated and child-initiated play should be maintained. By planning for play, practitioners could ensure that a balanced play environment was available. This could involve the setting up of play-stations. It was strongly suggested that the level of play could be raised by the involvement of the adult at strategic moments and by the affirmation of the adult of play that is in progress. However, to be most effective it was deemed important that the adult involved should possess an awareness of the benefits of play to the development of the child. If adults knew the areas of learning they were supporting through various activities, then it was felt that they could ensure that there was breadth and balance in children's learning and that learning experiences were matched

to the age and stage of development of the child. Two strategies mentioned that could be used in supporting learning through play were; adults modelling play and peer mentoring, involving mixed age groupings.

It was noted that Vygotsky (1978) stressed the importance of symbolism in play as a means through which imagination and understanding can be developed. For that reason, Vygotsky regarded play as the leading source of development in early childhood.

Play situations/scenarios could also afford opportunities for assessing different types of learning outcomes through observation. Such observation could be used to inform practice and maximise learning opportunities. It was suggested that gathering information through play could enable the adult to facilitate children's learning according to their needs. It would also provide information that could be shared with parents

Side by side with this endorsement of play, participants emphasised the need for funding to ensure that the appropriate equipment and materials, for both indoor and outdoor activities, were available. The issues of space and numbers of children per adult currently limit opportunities for certain play. From the point of view of the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum, Early Start and infant teachers suggested that the value of play, and the various forms of play, should be communicated to parents/guardians, teachers and management in schools, as there can be an expectation of formal, structured learning, particularly in infant classes. . There was acknowledgement that although children may be supported to learn and to achieve certain goals through various activities, yet there was apprehension that if the language of 'outcomes' crept into the framework, there could be an onus on adults to help children reach certain standards by certain ages. It was felt that this might not reflect how children learn and develop in early childhood.

The recording of learning outcomes through the observation of play, the setting up of play situations, the supporting of learning outcomes through play and the need for practitioners to have time to share observations and plan, were listed as areas that could present challenges for the practitioner.

The role of the adult

In exploring the image of the child as a learner, participants in the consultation showed strong support for the role of the adult as the more advanced learner in guiding, supporting and scaffolding the child's learning. The importance of the adult as a role model was emphasised as much learning in the 1-6 year age group comes through imitation of observed activity. It was felt that the role of parents/guardians as the primary educators and most important influence on the child's learning should be acknowledged. It was suggested in one submission that children's attitudes at an early age reflect the attitudes of the immediate world in which they are living rather than reflecting their own cognitive development. It was implied that adults, therefore, have a crucial role to play in fostering attitudes of understanding and tolerance, responsibility, inclusion, equality and justice and a respect for different and diverse views. The incorporation of a global and justice perspective within any early childhood education programme was promoted. Another important function of the adult was in assisting the child to learn from his/her experiences of life, both negative

and positive. Some negative experiences cannot be avoided and children need help to come to terms with and integrate these experiences into their lives and grow beyond them.

Several participants suggested that professional development for practitioners would be necessary to realise the image of the child as a learner as expressed in the consultative document. They highlighted the need to allocate appropriate resources for this professional development so that practitioners could be trained in how best to support children's learning through assessing and planning for individual needs. A suggestion made was that practitioners would be provided with in-service days following the launch of the *Framework for Early Learning*. It was also suggested that the modular content of childcare and education courses should be assessed and evaluated to ensure that practices being advocated are in line with the thinking within the consultative document. It was proposed that trainers/tutors/facilitators should hold relevant qualifications in Early Childhood Studies, supported by a background of experience in working with young children. Many participants in the consultation expressed concern that, at present, valuable and appropriate learning experiences are being lost, as a significant number of practitioners outside the formal education system do not document a planned, child-led curriculum.

A further suggestion by participants in the context of professional development concerned the training of '*specialists*'. In order to support the practitioner in accommodating the individuality of each child and in particular his/her creative development, a proposal emerged during the consultation for the deployment of practitioners who would be available to settings outside the formal education system for the purpose of facilitating learning in the creative arts area. These practitioners would also contribute to the professional development of the setting practitioners.

A child-centred holistic approach

Consultation participants supported the child-centredness of the image of the child as a learner. They strongly advocated that the child should be at the centre of all planning for his/her learning. While the adult will provide opportunities for learning, there was consensus that the child should lead the learning process. The child is particularly receptive to different kinds of learning at different times and he/she is unique with special interests, abilities or difficulties in different areas. Participants felt that the child's uniqueness as a person should lead to a differentiation in the approaches and equipment used, with an attempt being made to provide as broad a range of learning experiences as possible. Since children build on their experiences, it was deemed important by several participants that the acquisition of new concepts and skills should build on what the child already knows, thinks and understands, as this both consolidates and fosters learning. The value of assimilation time for children was also mentioned. Allowing children time to rest and relax is an important element in assimilating the knowledge acquired in any learning situation.

Some participants in the consultation suggested that the consultative document over-emphasised the child as an 'individual' and that the framework should give sufficient attention to the '*connectedness of the child within a dynamic, living system*'.

The importance of inter-agency and inter-departmental co-operation was raised again. This co-operation was highlighted as being particularly critical for children with special educational needs. The health and education sectors need to work and plan together to ensure a holistic and child-centred approach to supporting children with special educational needs in their early learning.

‘Content’ of early learning

Participants drew attention to particular types of early learning which they considered crucial: development of self-esteem, communication and interpersonal skills. They viewed the promotion of a healthy sense of self-esteem as forming the basis for children’s development of constructive relationships with others, and providing them with the confidence to reach out to new areas of knowledge, perspectives and ideas. Participants considered a child’s self-esteem would be best fostered where he/she experienced a sense of belonging, acceptance and security, and was participating in and contributing to what was going on around him/her. These experiences would lay the foundations for happiness and fulfilment in the present, in later education and in adult life.

Participants strongly agreed that children learn best through their actions and interactions with others. They supported the early development of children’s communication and interpersonal skills. The development of a range of skills that would assist children in initiating, maintaining and enjoying relationships with other children, in reading their immediate world and the wider world to which they are connected, in resolving conflict peacefully and in increasing their ability to take another’s point of view or empathise with others, was promoted. It was that this could be achieved through listening, speaking, negotiating and decision-making, as well as through non-verbal and creative forms of communication. Participants suggested that children should be actively and consciously encouraged to articulate their own feelings and to consider the feelings of others through role-play, games, simulation and circle group discussions. Childminders in particular, suggested that learning in the area of communication and interpersonal skills could be supported and enhanced by bringing children from infants to six years together for at least part of the day. They outlined how such mixed-age groupings are beneficial to all children in the group as they promote social interaction among children and are effective in enhancing language competence. Younger children can imitate the more mature social behaviour and social skills of the older children while the older children can empathise with, and demonstrate their competencies by helping younger children.

Key idea: The adult’s role

The importance the consultative document places on the adult’s role in supporting children’s early learning was strongly supported during the consultation. The quality of the adult-child interactions has a profound impact on early learning, and on how children perceive themselves as learners. The child’s self-esteem can be closely related to that of the adult.

Participants noted that the discussion of the role of the adult in the document is quite ‘*broad*’ in places, and that more specific information would be necessary to support all those who work with children from birth to six years. Participants highlighted that

there might be many different interpretations of how pro-active the adult should be in particular learning situations/scenarios. Modelling behaviour for children might also be difficult in practice, where there were contextual factors such as resources and high adult:child ratios with which to contend.

Implementation and professional development

In raising the status of early learning, and in highlighting the crucial role of the adult, the framework could help in the professionalisation of the sector according to consultation participants. However, they stressed that the current level of human and physical resources available in early childhood settings would result in differing capacities of adults to mediate the framework locally and to plan '*the specifics of the learning experiences*'.

Participants emphasised the range of adults (parents/guardians, childminders, practitioners and other professionals) who might use the framework. Early childhood care and education also attracts occasional workers, and some may not have opportunities to develop their expertise in working with children. On the other hand, others may have pursued professional courses to postgraduate level. Participants argued that the framework needs to offer an appropriate and accessible level of support to all these adults.

In light of the importance of the role of the adult, consultation participants felt that the framework should be informed by the work of training/in-service providers, for example, FÁS. The reference to progress in the area of professional development and accreditation in Section 1 of the consultative document was welcomed in this regard.

Communication and language

The importance, which the consultative document places on high quality verbal exchanges for creating a rich language experience for the child, was welcomed. Participants noted the natural ability of children during their early years to learn more than one language. This presents a tremendous opportunity for language acquisition in Irish, but also constitutes a challenge in ensuring that children at this age have access to high quality exchanges by native or very good speakers. Some participants noted that the consultative document's discussion on the importance of interactions with babies and toddlers is a good way to begin to look at curriculum in a non-threatening way. High quality interactions with adults are crucial for children under three years, where children have little or no formal language. Listening was also deemed an important aspect of communication. With regard to second language learning, one submission cited the work of Lave and Wenger (1991) who suggest that learning is about participation in a 'community of practice.' Opportunities to hear, understand and use a second language should be maximised as they occur, for example within the context of play and in meaningful, active contexts.

Enabling children

The role of the adult in enabling and empowering the child to have a greater role in his/her own learning is of particular importance considering how important self-motivation is for life-long learning. The discussion in the consultative document on

the cultivation of dispositions such as curiosity, risk-taking, concentration, fairness, resilience and creativity was welcomed during the consultation. There was discussion on the adult as a reflective practitioner, who models the transfer of learning from one situation to another. In doing so, he/she works to promote reflection and critical thinking with young children and fosters positive disposition towards life long learning.

While participants considered the role of the adult to be well explored and discussed in the consultative document, they felt that more attention should be afforded to the role of other children, especially from mixed-age groupings, in supporting children to learn. As mentioned earlier in the discussion on the idea of 'The image of the child as a learner', participants and especially childminders, highlighted the importance of bringing babies, toddlers and young children together. They argued that such practice reaped benefits for all children, but most particularly children showing resentment, aggression, stress, over-competitiveness or excessive shyness.

Adults working together

The consultative document recognises the importance of close and supportive relationships between all the adults who work with children. The consultation highlighted strong support for this partnership approach. The key worker system in particular received much support. Discussion also took place on the importance of continuity between such out-of-home supports. For example, it was stressed that support services, such as any form of therapy, for children whose first language was Irish, would be available through the medium of Irish.

Mediation for parents/guardians

Consultation participants recommended that the framework would seek as much as possible to encourage parental involvement in children's learning, both in the home and in out-of-home settings. However, participants were concerned about how parents/guardians would be enabled to use, and engage with the framework. Some felt the consultative document was not appealing to some parents/guardians and concluded that the same problem could apply to the framework itself.

Workshops, local fora and networks on early learning involving parents/guardians, childminders and practitioners were suggested as means of informing parents/guardians of their role as early educators and how they could fulfil this role. These activities would enable parents/guardians to engage more with education generally, including the Primary School Curriculum. Many participants also saw the framework as being helpful in raising parents'/guardians' awareness of the importance of play and assessment in supporting children in their learning.

Key idea: Thematic framework

Participants in the consultation broadly agreed with the development of a national framework using a thematic approach to presenting children's learning. They highlighted the importance of, and need to raise public awareness of the thematic approach and its benefits for children. As with participants' feedback on other key ideas, the broad agreement was accompanied by a number of recommendations for moving forward in developing the framework.

Themes and developmental domains

Participants expressed broad welcome for adopting a thematic approach in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*. They were confident that the thematic approach would help to foreground the child and his/her abilities, and to highlight the interconnectedness of all learning. The themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking) would help articulate the nature and scope of children's learning, and raise awareness of children as learners from birth. There were suggestions that present considerations of the physical building, of health and safety and other structural issues mean that the child as a person can often be overlooked.

While there was broad agreement with developing a thematic framework, the consultation highlighted a need for more discussion on the rationale for a thematic approach as opposed to a developmental domain approach. Participants indicated concern that a thematic approach, unlike a developmental domain approach, would be subject to multiple interpretations given its more 'open' nature. Some participants suggested that the four themes proposed for the framework might be too broad to be useful for children with special educational needs such as intellectual disability.

Participants highlighted that many childminders and practitioners already use a developmental domain approach in their work with children. This approach is also adopted in early childhood curriculum guidance in Northern Ireland. This has particular relevance for early childhood settings outside the formal education system and located in border counties, as a number of these currently use the guidance from Northern Ireland in their work with children. Participants also drew attention to the fact that the curriculum areas in the Primary School Curriculum are grounded in developmental domains. Given this predominance of the developmental domain model, some participants considered it would be easier for adults to use the framework if it were based on developmental domains rather than themes. On the other hand, it was recognised that a thematic approach would offer great potential for forging links across curriculum guidance and introducing a greater level of coherence and connectedness in children's early learning.

Nonetheless, articulating the connections between the framework and the infant section of the Primary School Curriculum was seen as a challenge. Clear links between themes and domains of development would help. It was suggested that explicit links between the framework and the strands within the different curriculum areas in the Primary School Curriculum could help in this regard. Otherwise the positive impact of the framework may not be realized as it could be considered to be somewhat divorced from the primary school.

Participants also expressed uncertainty regarding the interface between the framework's themes and curriculum guidance currently used outside the formal education system. They highlighted the importance of the sector being assured that the framework would not replace existing curriculum materials but would provide another way of planning for children's learning, and in this way link with guidance based on developmental domains. Participants considered it important that developmental domains were not presented as being less useful than themes.

Diversity

The importance of the framework's themes embracing human diversity was noted throughout the consultation. Because the themes foreground the child and his/her individuality, children's differing experiences of early childhood in Ireland in terms of belonging to identifiable groups in society, (e.g., ability, language, ethnicity) can be more effectively conveyed. Being child-centred, participants saw the thematic approach as being potentially helpful in transcending barriers that children from different cultural backgrounds may experience within a developmental domain or subject based approach to learning.

It was noted that the thematic approach was compatible with development education in that it lends itself to incorporating a global and justice perspective. There was welcome for the importance placed on the provision of opportunities for discouraging stereotypical beliefs and attitudes and also for fostering inclusion, equality and positive attitudes towards difference. The feedback also raised the importance of the role of the adult in this regard. It was noted that while children aged three can associate positive or negative attitudes towards difference, this does not reflect their cognitive ability but rather reflects the attitudes of those around them.

One submission discussed the importance of activism (as developed in Derman-Sparks, 1989) as a sound basis for working with young children. Activism supports the educator to appropriately explore and challenge attitudes thus expanding children's concept of fairness and feelings of empathy, fostering critical thinking and enabling them to gain tools (language/strategies) and confidence to challenge discriminatory behaviour and attitudes.

Identification and configuration of themes

Participants in the consultation called for further consideration to be given to the framework's themes. There was some concern about the use of the word 'theme' and an alternative word would be preferred by some. The word 'theme' is already used to refer to topic work. During the consultation, it also became increasingly evident that there were differing understandings about what each theme, as currently titled, might be expected to contain. Additionally, for some participants, the four themes represent two qualitatively different types. Children's well-being and within that, their identity and belonging, could be viewed as outcomes, while communication and exploring and thinking contribute to these outcomes. Well-being could also be interpreted as an over-arching concept, which subsumes the other three themes.

Some participants thought the four proposed themes were limiting, and might '*pin you down.*' The nine dimensions of the National Children's Strategy (2000) were seen to provide greater scope in guiding children in their learning. Some participants also considered the themes to be adult-led, as opposed to being child-led.

The consultation resulted in many suggestions for further developing and expanding the four themes of well-being, identity and belonging, communication and exploring and thinking. There were calls for additions to be made to the number and/or content of the themes. These additions should emphasise the input or contribution of the child to the learning programme, to the setting and to the relationships, through which he/she learns. Some participants felt that the child as a contributor, as someone who can love and do things, wasn't captured in the themes as presented in the consultative document. Contribution and participation are the means by which children learn most, and their inclusion would also acknowledge the importance of imitation in a child's learning. Some participants also felt that care was not sufficiently visible in the presentation of the themes in the consultative document. Given the centrality of care in children's early years, there was strong agreement that this needed to be embedded in the framework.

The importance the consultative document places on language as a vehicle for learning, which permeates relationships and play was welcomed. Participants in the consultation discussed the child as a language learner, particularly in the context of the child's plurilingual development in a state which is officially bilingual. It was suggested that immersion education and second language acquisition could perhaps be integrated more effectively in the framework's themes and/or throughout the framework's contents.

The arts also featured strongly in discussions on the framework's themes. The Reggio Emilia approach to early learning, which has attracted world acclaim, was cited by participants as a good example where the arts are placed at the centre of early childhood practice. Participants requested greater attention be given to the arts through reviewing the themes, or by incorporating them across the framework.

A number of participants proposed that 'creativity' should be incorporated, either as a fifth theme or by being incorporated into an existing theme, e.g. the theme 'Exploring and thinking' could be expanded and renamed 'Exploring, creating and thinking'.

It was also suggested that both *physical* and *emotional* well-being should be included under the theme of 'Well-being'. Peer group interaction, including mixed-age groupings, was considered vital for well-being.

Other recommendations made regarding the framework's themes included:

- the inclusion of self-expression
- the omission of identity
- the amalgamation of well-being and belonging
- the inclusion of a more explicit focus on children's actual ability and potential ability to think in the abstract, and how this thinking can be encouraged.
- the inclusion of social well-being through warm consistent relationships

- the importance of not considering exploring and thinking solely within the cognitive domain. It should reflect the holistic nature of learning and include physical, social and emotional domains.

Implementation

Throughout the consultation participants working outside the formal education system, noted that practitioners may not have the necessary skills, and knowledge to engage in curriculum development locally. This means that the framework and its themes may not be supported or mediated through local curriculum development. Participants highlighted the implications of this for training and professional development, to ensure a readiness to fully realise the potential for early learning which children show, and which is highlighted through the framework's themes.

Key idea: The role of assessment

Assessment generated considerable discussion during the consultation. Participants across the early childhood sector indicated broad agreement with the importance the consultative document places on assessing children's early learning, and the role of assessment in planning and providing for future learning. Primarily, they identified assessment as an important tool in enhancing learning and ensuring it is meaningful for each child.

Many participants, particularly those working outside the formal education system, highlighted concerns about the current capacity of the early childhood sector to engage in assessment as articulated in the consultative document. They argued that significant environmental changes would be necessary to support adults in their work in assessing children's learning in a way which was appropriate at this stage in a child's life. These are discussed below under various theme headings.

Child-centred assessment

Many participants in the consultation reflected on the emphasis the consultative document places on assessment for empowering the child as a learner. By focusing on the child's strengths, abilities and progress and building on these, assessment can be experienced as something positive and affirmative. Participants drew attention to the importance of assessing children's learning in context. The consultative document highlights the necessity to consider each child's social, cultural and physical environments and the impact these have on what, when and how the child learns. Participants agreed with this.

The importance of assessment being child-centred was also raised in the context of the appropriateness of assessment practices, processes and tools. Participants highlighted reservations about the suitability of formal assessment of a child's learning in early childhood. These reservations were shared across the sector. Participants were concerned about the possibility of the *Framework for Early Learning* as a national framework endorsing formal assessment, and cautioned against this. They also warned that assessment should not lead to a focus on learning outcomes. Such a development would have the potential to narrow learning for the child by placing pressure on adults to focus on certain learning at certain stages in a child's early years. Consultation participants strongly agreed that assessment needed

to be informal and reflect the child's particular stage of development, resulting in more reliable information to inform planning for further learning.

There was strong agreement that assessment in early childhood should be informal and ongoing recognising the diversity of learners and supporting children as they learn at different paces and in different ways. Participants identified narration and observation as critical tools in facilitating reliable assessments of children's early learning. Childminders, professionals supporting parents/guardians in their role as early educators, and professionals working in special education, made specific reference to the usefulness of the developmental milestone model in supporting the assessment process. This was considered to be particularly helpful for parents/guardians in alerting them at an early stage to potential difficulties and/or delays experienced by their children. Infant teachers were particularly concerned about the current unavailability of appropriate profiling assessment tools for use with young children.

Early identification

Participants welcomed the emphasis the consultative document places on the early identification of children with special educational needs, and recognised the important role of assessment in facilitating this. They emphasised the importance of training in equipping them with appropriate intervention strategies to support the child in his/her learning. Some participants were optimistic that the development of practitioners' expertise in early assessment would result in fewer children with special needs being identified 'late'. Other participants and particularly those outside the formal education system, expressed concern that unless necessary resources and professional services were made more readily available, early identification would have minimal impact on supporting these children in their learning. In expanding on this point, participants drew attention once again to the necessity for inter-departmental co-operation where children require access to services and expertise within different government departments, primarily the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Health and Children. Some participants highlighted how current co-operation mechanisms and structures can result in children with special educational needs experiencing discontinuity in their learning. For example, when a child who qualifies for a Special Needs Assistant (SNA) funded by the local Health Board makes the transition to the formal education system the SNA typically does not transfer with the child. Practitioners highlighted the upset and anxiety this potentially causes for the child and his/her family.

Improvement in quality

The theme of improvement in quality through assessment emerged through the consultation. Firstly, participants drew attention to the important role of assessment in ensuring continuity and progression in children's learning, and ensuring that learning is meaningful and relevant to each child. Secondly, participants identified the focus on assessment within a national framework as being an important step forward in facilitating the development of a common language and understanding of assessment in early childhood. This should lead to the promotion of good practices reflecting international thinking and research on children's early learning. Participants endorsed the importance of reflective practice in the continuous improvement of the quality of

provision for children's learning. To support this, participants suggested that training in self-evaluation would be beneficial.

Time

Time was a recurring theme in discussions and submissions. Within this theme, participants drew attention to two main challenges. There was strong consensus about the potential demand assessment placed on practitioners' time, in terms of the overall time required for assessment to be carried out effectively, and the time necessary to assess each child individually. There was strong agreement that the time demand generated by assessment could impact negatively on the time available for child-adult interactions. Many participants in the consultation highlighted that this was exacerbated by current adult: child ratios in early childhood settings. This environmental constraint was of particular concern for infant teachers who referred to the large class sizes with which they were working. Finding non-contact time essential for recording, discussing assessment information with colleagues and/or other professionals such as therapists and public health nurses, and reflective practice was identified as a further challenge. Practitioners working in settings outside the formal education system made many references to the issue of remuneration for this work.

Assessment expertise

With the exception of infant teachers, participants in the consultation process continually drew attention to the lack of training in assessment which currently exists in the early childhood sector. Ongoing training is critical to enable childminders and practitioners to assess children's learning in an appropriate manner and to use the information gleaned to inform future learning. Participants argued that current funding levels militate against building assessment expertise within staffs. Without appropriate training, participants viewed the reliability of assessment information as being an issue, particularly in the context of sharing it with parents/guardians. Participants, especially those attending the regional seminars, were concerned that a lack of assessment expertise would contribute to the 'labelling' of children which could have very significant negative consequences for these children's experiences as young learners.

While a need for professional development was clearly identified during the consultation, there were also requests for the provision of detailed guidance on the assessment process and the role of the practitioner in this process. Such guidance could be included in the framework itself.

Term 'assessment'

The term 'assessment' presented difficulty for many participants in the consultation. They considered the term to have negative connotations of testing, and measuring a child's early learning against pre-determined attainment levels. There was strong consensus that this would not reflect the dynamic nature of learning in the early years of a child's life. Participants suggested replacing the term 'assessment' with '*observation*' or '*evaluation*' which they considered would reflect more accurately the functions and processes of early assessment. Such terms would also be more

acceptable particularly to parents/guardians and to practitioners in settings other than infant classes.

A collaborative process

Assessment is a complex process and particularly so in early childhood given the complexity of the learning process at this stage. Throughout the consultation, participants stressed the importance of assessment being understood and experienced as a collaborative process involving the child, the parent/guardian, the childminder/practitioner, and other relevant professionals. This partnership enables the sharing of information and insights from different perspectives greatly enriching and informing the assessment process. Participants made specific reference to the role children can play as assessors of their own learning, and the positive contribution this can make to their empowerment as learners.

Childminders and practitioners working outside the formal education system frequently referred to the role and involvement of parents/guardians in the assessment process. In particular, they posed questions about

- the types of information to be shared with parents/guardians
- the reliability of assessment information being shared with parents/guardians given practitioners' current levels of assessment expertise (as discussed earlier).

Documentation

Throughout the consultation, participants and especially those working outside the formal education system posed a number of questions regarding access to and the use of assessment documentation. These questions concerned

- the purposes of documented assessment information and the likelihood of it being used for external monitoring purposes
- the audiences for assessment documentation
- the confidentiality of assessment information in the context of the Freedom of Information Act
- the transfer of documentation with the child as he/she makes the transition to the formal education system, and the potential use of this information to 'stream' children.

The consultative document emphasises the importance of using assessment information to develop an individual education plan for children with special educational needs. Childminders in the consultation drew attention to the importance of these plans for every child.

The National Children's Office recommended the use of the nine inter-linked dimensions expressed in the National Children's Strategy (2000) as a guide for adults in assessing children's early learning. These dimensions comprise physical and mental well-being, emotional and behavioural well-being, intellectual capacity, spiritual and moral well-being, identity, self-care, family relationships, social and peer relationships, and social presentation.

Key idea: Contents of the framework

The consultation showed strong support in the early childhood sector for the contents as outlined in the consultative document, which would help sustain and create a wealth of good practices in supporting children in their early learning. In particular, the principles were seen as being helpful to practitioners in using the *Framework for Early Learning* to develop a curriculum tailored to the needs of the children with whom they work, and their own needs as practitioners. A number of other themes emerged from the data.

Advice on assessing learning

Building on the feedback on the key idea of ‘The role of assessment’, consultation participants welcomed the inclusion of advice on assessment in the framework. Participants outside the formal education system specifically requested that this advice would show

- how assessment can be integrated more easily within settings
- how relationships and play can provide key contexts for assessment (as well as providing key contexts for learning)
- how the contributions of different people such as parents/guardians, other children, and the child himself/herself are important and can be encouraged
- how recording can be used to celebrate achievement and to identify strengths, interests, learning styles and challenges
- how written, pictorial and audio records of children’s learning can be created and used.

As outlined earlier, there was also support especially among childminders, for exploring the potential of an individual education plan for supporting all children in their learning.

Interpretation

Achieving the correct balance between providing broad parameters on the one hand and providing specifics that would be useful in guiding adults in their work with children emerged as a theme in exploring the proposed contents of the framework. Some consultation participants noted that the adoption of a broad, descriptive approach (as is being proposed) rather than a prescriptive approach may result in the contents of the framework being open to differing interpretations, lacking definition, and consequently being ineffective as a means of improving children’s experiences.

Articulation of the philosophical underpinning

The definitions provided in the consultative document for key concepts (either in the body of the text or in the glossary) was welcomed. However, participants noted that there was a need in some cases to acknowledge to a greater degree the philosophy(ies) underpinning particular definitions. For example, it was suggested that defining developmentally appropriate practice as practice which reflects a child’s particular age and stage of development suggests a Piagetian understanding of children, and should be acknowledged as such, if that is the case. Similarly, the framework should be accompanied by a stated philosophical approach or indeed, approaches, as

appropriate. Such a clearer articulation, it was felt, would support more effective implementation of the framework.

Contextualisation

It was frequently noted during the consultation that the framework's contents will need to be rooted in current best practices in the early childhood sector. This will involve developing closer links with settings for the ongoing development of the framework.

As reported earlier, participants referred to the importance of the framework's contents reflecting and accommodating the reality of children's current experiences of early childhood. They gave particular attention to Ireland's multi-cultural society and the ensuing importance of the framework drawing on the Anti-Bias approach to curriculum development. Development education was also seen as having much to offer to the framework as it emphasises interconnectedness of people, equality, and the role of the individual as a change agent in supporting justice and democracy.

Differentiated presentation

Given the range of people involved in supporting children in their early learning, many participants in the consultation felt that there was a need to differentiate the contents of the framework and their presentation. This would require differentiated materials for specific groups, such as parents/guardians and health personnel. There was a recommendation for the use of alternative media in disseminating and in publishing the framework, for example, user-friendly leaflets and videos. Participants saw this differentiation as being critical to cater for the different roles and needs of those responsible for supporting early learning.

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

Like the responses to the other eight key ideas, participants in the consultation indicated broad agreement with the proposed model for presenting the child's learning in the framework. In providing feedback on the model, many participants offered suggestions for further developing the model.

Goals and learning experiences

Participants in the consultation showed broad welcome for the proposed model (themes, aims, learning goals, suggestions for learning activities/experiences, learning exemplars). They identified a number of benefits in presenting learning using goals and learning experiences. Learning goals guide adults in terms of what they should and could be focusing on in children's early learning. Goals based on themes rather than developmental domains would convey very effectively the nature of learning as being connected and dynamic rather than compartmentalized and linear. The framework's inclusion of suggestions for learning experiences would show that a range of strategies and opportunities can be used to enrich learning for each child.

However, participants expressed concern about the implementation and interpretation of the model, given the current diversity in terms of expertise and experience among

those who will ultimately be using the framework. This concern was greatest with regard to the learning goals. With limited knowledge, it was feared that some adults could be directed by the learning goals alone (as opposed to the learning goals in conjunction with the suggestions for learning activities, and the exemplars), and in so doing, could actually relegate the importance of play and a child-centred approach in early learning.

Participants suggested that the term 'goal' could be open to multiple interpretations. Some adults may view these goals as prescriptive targets which the child must reach by a certain time, resulting in the framework being led by these goals and the needs of the child being subordinated. Suggested alternatives included '*potential learning*' or '*enabling objectives*'.

A 'practical' framework

In order to implement the themes as proposed in the framework document, it was felt that clarification of what best practice actually is should be included, and that specific and concrete examples of children's learning and of how the theory can be translated into practice are required. Participants recommended that these examples indicate explicitly how children's learning can be extended and enriched on a day-to-day basis. They also highlighted the need for both guidance and training on *how* the framework would inform daily activities, in other words, how the aims, learning goals and suggestions for learning experiences would be reflected in the adult's daily activities, routines and practices. Without such guidance, many participants felt the framework's usefulness to those working with children, would be limited.

There were also requests for greater exemplification of each of the framework's themes. Participants suggested that this could involve the inclusion of topics and activities, potential learning outcomes, recommendations for adult participation in activities, and guidelines for assessing progress in children's learning within each theme. Practical supports such as sample planning templates and planning exemplars addressing short-term and long-term planning would be needed to show how the aims and learning goals could be translated into practice.

To make the framework a 'living document,' one proposal was that it should take the form of a ring binder so that additional material could be added or removed. By having the document available on-line, it would be accessible to a large number of people, including parents.

Learning and development

The consultation drew attention to the philosophical underpinning of the framework. As discussed earlier in the context of the key idea of 'A national framework', participants called for the central guiding philosophy(ies) to be made explicit in the *Framework for Early Learning*. There was a suggestion that the consultative document doesn't adequately set out the differences between constructivism, as demonstrated by Piaget, and social constructivism, as demonstrated by Vygotsky. This is especially important in how learning and development are presented and understood. It was argued that a more precise differentiation between learning and development would be needed in the development of the framework. Such

differentiation would have implications for how learning is presented in the proposed model of aims, goals and suggestions for activities.

It was proposed that cultural diversity and the importance of valuing difference should be given more prominence and that the pictorial representations of the themes included in the framework should reflect diversity in all its manifestations. For instance, children of different skin colours should be pictured learning *together* and men, in a caring role, should also be visible in the framework.

Implementation

As highlighted in the reportage on other key ideas, there were many questions during the consultation regarding the implementation and monitoring of the framework. These questions were posed mainly by those working outside the formal education system. There was frequent reference to the resource implications of implementation in terms of physical resources, human resources and time. Greater investment in human resources was seen as being particularly important to embed the centrality of play, relationships and assessment in supporting children in their early learning. Participants were also concerned as to how the monitoring would 'fit' with existing monitoring such as that undertaken by pre-school inspectors, who work with sessional services, full-day care services, childminding services and drop-in centres.

Continuing the theme of implementation, participants also raised the interface between the *Framework for Early Learning* and the National Framework for Quality, which is currently being developed by the CECDE, as a discussion point. Given the difficulties involved in evaluating quality, they recommended that the framework developed by the NCCA would include guidance on how quality in diversity can be promoted.

Development of the framework

The work of the NCCA and the Early Childhood Technical Working Group in developing the consultative document was commended throughout the consultation. Many participants suggested that future work in developing the framework should involve a wider representation of the early childhood sector, for example, the Quality and Training Sub-groups of City and County Childcare Committees. These groups should also play a key role in the promotion of the framework on its completion. Ongoing development of the framework should also be shared with those working directly with children '*on the ground*'. Many participants also emphasised the importance of involving those in the health sector and particularly those involved in the areas of public health and child and family services. Health Boards issue guidelines to parents/guardians on children's early learning and development which address areas such as relationships and play. The Health Boards are also charged with pre-school inspections. Hence, participants identified co-operation with and involvement of the health sector as being critical.

Finally, participants repeatedly called for ongoing consultation rather than terminal consultation in proceeding with the development of the framework.

Conclusion

Mirroring the findings from the response form data, participants in the regional seminars and briefing meetings, and those who participated via the written submissions, indicated a high level of agreement with all nine key ideas. Like the respondents to the response forms, participants in these latter three activities indicated strong support for much of the thinking presented in the consultative document. They also elaborated on what they considered to be the key challenges in implementing the *Framework for Early Learning*. The seminars, briefings and written submissions provided participants with opportunities to present and to discuss their concerns in detail, and to explore and to suggest possible strategies for addressing these concerns. Like the findings from the response forms, there were a number of recurring themes in the data gathered through the seminars, briefings and submissions. These again included implementation, parents/guardians and resources.

Drawing on the findings across all the completed consultation activities, section 5 of the report signposts some areas and issues which require further consideration and discussion in developing the *Framework for Early Learning*.

SECTION 5: PRELIMINARY SIGN-POSTS FOR ONGOING WORK

Implications of the findings for NCCA

The findings presented in Sections 3 and 4 of this report show that participants in the consultation expressed a high level of agreement with the nine key ideas in the consultative document. The consultation findings also identified a number of issues which require further consideration in the development of the framework. These include:

Vision and aims

- making the philosophical underpinnings of the framework, including theories of learning and development more explicit.
- explicating the relationship between care and education within the framework to emphasise the educative nature of care and the caring nature of education.
- embracing the principle of cultural diversity more explicitly within the vision to highlight the early years as a critical time for learning to respect and understand difference as a natural part of life.

Image of the child as a learner

- further elaborating on the crucial role of play in the holistic development of the child, including the value of outdoor play, in particular.

The adult's role

- developing practical examples of how adults can support, facilitate, and model play for children

Themes

- reviewing the four proposed themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, exploring and thinking) to include a greater focus on
 - (a) the child as a contributor to, and participant in the learning process
 - (b) the creative arts
 - (c) first and second language acquisition, and the official bilingual status of Irish
 - (d) the child's 'care' needs.
- exploring further how the framework's themes might 'connect' more readily with the developmental domains used in both the Primary School Curriculum and in much curriculum guidance used outside the formal education system.

Assessment

- examining the appropriate role of assessment (methods and tools) in early learning and providing explicit advice for adults in how to support their child's learning and development
- re-visiting the language of assessment to ensure shared understanding of assessment terms amongst all practitioners from different contexts and settings.

A model for presenting ‘learning’

- differentiating the content of the framework to cater for the range of adults responsible for children’s early learning. This accessibility issue is particularly pertinent in the context of supporting parents/guardians as early educators.
- exploring how the framework can provide sufficient information to childminders and practitioners to support them in their work with children, while avoiding the development of a framework which is prescriptive and specific.

Implications of the findings for the sector

During the consultation a number of issues were raised in relation to the supporting strategies required for implementation of the framework. While these are sectoral issues, they have the potential to significantly affect the extent to which the framework can contribute to the provision of quality learning experiences for children in their early years. The following issues were identified as critical during the consultation:

Implementation

- developing an implementation plan which would
 - (a) outline how the framework will be implemented
 - (b) identify the resources and supports which will be made available to enable the implementation process.
- adopting the six operational principles of the National Children’s Strategy as a framework for planning for the implementation of the *Framework for Early Learning*.
- outlining how the implementation of the framework might relate to existing inspection processes and arrangements (e.g. Dept. of Education and Science, Dept. of Health and Children) and monitoring programmes (e.g. quality assurance/improvement programmes developed by various organisations).
- demonstrating how the *Framework for Early Learning* can link with the National Framework for Quality being developed by the CECDE.
- achieving greater inter-agency and inter-departmental co-operation in supporting children in early childhood.

Professional development

- providing appropriate pre-service and ongoing professional development for those working in the early childhood sector. Assessment of children’s learning may require particular attention.

Many of these issues were also cited in the findings from the OECD’s thematic review which is discussed in the introduction to this report.

Follow-on work: Ongoing consultation

The findings presented in this report will provide direction and guidance for the NCCA’s ongoing work in developing the framework. However, before concluding

this consultation report, it is important to emphasise that while this consultation is concluding, the work of the NCCA in developing the framework in consultation with the Early Childhood sector is really just beginning. During the consultation, the sector requested ongoing involvement in the developmental process, with targeted involvement of parents, practitioners and professionals in the health sector. The representation of children's and practitioners experiences and voices in the framework was also considered essential.

In analysing the findings from the consultation, the NCCA considered the representation of parents/guardians and health professionals to be lower than expected. Given parents'/guardians' critical role as early educators and the fact that health professionals play a central role in supporting many children particularly in their earliest years, the NCCA plans to engage with these two groups more extensively during the development work on the framework.

In designing the consultation on the document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*, the NCCA planned to conduct consultation with children during the development of the framework itself rather than on the ideas expressed in the consultative document. It was envisaged that such a strategy would be more beneficial in terms of including children's voices in the design and contents of the framework. Consultation with children is a key principle underpinning the work of the National Children's Office (NCO) and following some initial discussions, the NCCA has already begun to design activities for consulting with children.

To ensure that the development of the framework is informed by the experiences of both children and adults in a range of settings, the NCCA plans to develop a range of portraits of early learning and development in these settings. The NCCA will work closely with a small number of early childhood settings reflecting the age range of children and the types of settings typical of the early childhood sector in Ireland. This work will enable the NCCA to consult with parents/guardians and various professionals in early childhood care and education on various elements of the framework as they are being designed and developed.

Finally, the NCCA's Early Childhood Committee will continue to support the development of the framework for early learning guided by the findings and implications of the consultation presented in this final report.

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APPENDIX 1

RESPONSE FORM

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APPENDIX 2

QUESTION GUIDE FOR BILATERAL MEETINGS

Towards a Framework for Early Learning **A consultative document**

Question guide for bilateral meetings

The questions below are intended to guide the discussions at the meeting. They are based on a number of the key ideas and proposals as presented in the consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning*. In responding to the questions, we invite you to share the views of your organisation and those you represent in the early childhood sector.

A national framework for early learning

- What does your organisation consider to be the benefits and challenges of a national framework for early learning?
- How might the challenges be addressed?

Vision and aims for the framework

- To what extent are the vision and aims appropriate for a national framework?
- What challenges, if any, are associated with the vision and aims?
- How might these challenges be addressed?

Image of the child as a learner and the role of the adult

- To what extent does the image of the child as a learner reflect the differing experiences children have of early childhood?
- What are the implications of these differing experiences for the design and content of the framework?
- To what extent does the role of the adult as presented in the consultative document, convey the different levels and types of supports children may require to extend and enrich their learning at different stages in early childhood?
- What should this role primarily entail?

Assessment

- What should be the purpose of assessment in early childhood?
- What are the key challenges, if any, in assessing children's early learning?
- What 'tools' should be used to assess children's early learning?
- What assessment information should be documented?
- Should information be transferred from setting to setting as the child moves between centre-based settings (including infant classes in primary schools)? How?

Thematic framework

- How does your organisation view the thematic approach to presenting the 'content' of children's learning in the framework? Would you suggest alternative themes or amendments to the themes? If so, what?
- What challenges, if any, might a thematic framework present for adults in supporting children? How might these be addressed?
- The consultative document presents learning through themes, aims, broad learning goals and exemplars. Can this model provide the necessary guidance to adults? What changes, if any, would you make to the model?

APPENDIX 3

QUESTION GUIDE FOR REGIONAL SEMINARS

Towards a Framework for Early Learning **A consultative document**

Question guide for regional seminars

A national framework

What do you think are the potential benefits and challenges of having a national framework to support children's learning from birth to six years?

Model for presenting learning

The consultative document suggests a model for presenting the child's learning in the framework. This model consists of

- four themes (well-being, identity and belonging, communication, and exploring and thinking)
- aims
- goals
- suggested learning experiences
- exemplars of learning.

What do you think are the potential benefits and challenges with this suggested model?

What other types of information do you think the framework should contain?

The role of assessment

The consultative document discusses the role of assessment in nurturing the child's early learning. Assessment provides the adult with the knowledge to recognise and celebrate the child's progress, and to plan for and support his/her learning in the most appropriate manner.

What do you think are the potential benefits and challenges with this role of assessment in nurturing the child's early learning?

Vision

The consultative document presents a vision for the framework as follows:

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

To what extent do you agree with the vision for the framework? What changes, if any, would you make to it?

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and ideas with the NCCA.

