

Perspectives on the relationship between  
education and care in early childhood –  
a background paper

Nóirín Hayes, PhD

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The contents of this background paper do not necessarily represent the views of the NCCA

2007 NCCA  
24 Merrion Square Dublin 2  
[www.ncca.ie](http://www.ncca.ie)

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## Foreward

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) advises the Minister for Education and Science on matters related to

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

(Education Act, 1998, Article 41-1).

In fulfilling its remit, the NCCA is developing a national framework to support adults in extending and enriching children's early learning and development from birth to six years. The NCCA refers to this framework as the *Framework for Early Learning*.

The publication of the consultative document, *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004) and the ensuing consultative process were important stepping stones in the NCCA's work in developing the Framework. The consultative document presented key ideas about such a framework and outlined proposals for the Framework's design. Reflecting on these ideas and proposals during the consultation, the early childhood sector posed questions for the NCCA in furthering the development of the Framework. Questions concerning the theory and research underpinning the Framework were amongst these. The NCCA is addressing these questions through a series of background papers. Collectively, these papers provide the theory trail which informs the Council's work in early childhood education.

This background paper, *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood* outlines the contribution that care and education can make to the Framework. The paper addresses the two recurrent, interacting and often contentious concepts central to the provisions of early childhood education – education and care.





## Introduction

The publication of the document *Towards a Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004) marked an important milestone in the development of early educational policy in Ireland. Used as the basis for a process of extensive consultation across the wide ranging sector of early childhood, defined by the White Paper *Ready to Learn* (Ireland, 1999) as the period between birth and six years, it provides a strong basis for critically examining some of the influencing issues that impact on the quality of early experiences for young children in Ireland (NCCA, 2005).

This paper, *Perspectives on the relationship between education and care in early childhood* was commissioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to outline the contribution that education and care *can make to the Framework*. The paper addresses the two recurrent, interacting and often contentious concepts central to the provision of early childhood education - education and care. It does so by considering the context within which early education is currently developing, nationally and internationally. In particular it considers how approaches to understanding the concepts of education and care impact on the lives of children from birth to six years through their influence on policy, curriculum and practice and professional development in early childhood care and education (ECCE).

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

There is much discussion across the sector - nationally or internationally - on the term best used to describe the unique and diverse types of provision for children in the age range birth through to six years. In Ireland, at a policy level a distinction has been made between childcare and early education. Indeed, within policy documents the references vary from Childcare (Ireland, 1999) to Early Childhood Education (DES, 1999; CECDE, 2006) through to Early Childhood Education and Care (OECD, 2004)

and Early Childhood Care and Education (NESF, 2004). It is the contention of this paper that quality provision in all the various services for children from birth to six years incorporates a balance of both care and education and is best described by the term 'early education'.

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

**Children  
are learning  
all the time**

## Understanding early childhood care and education

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

Our understanding of the importance of relationships and interactions in the process of development has been strengthened by research which has shown the powerful role

that the social context plays, particularly in the lives of very young children. Studies into collaborative learning in context and the importance of 'intersubjectivity' – the ability to 'read other minds' (Bruner, 1996) - have informed a move towards practice which sees the child as an active participant in the learning process (David, 1999a).

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

**Children are active participants in their learning**

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

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

This paper presents evidence that the dynamic process approach to early childhood care and education offers more for children's positive development and learning than either the academic (education) or play-based (care) approach alone. Research consistently shows that successful early education facilitates the child in active learning in learning environments or 'dispositional milieu' (Carr, 2001a) that are well planned,

where staff are well trained, confident and supported<sup>1</sup> in their work (Abbott & Moylett, 1999; Ball, 1994; David, 1993; Ireland, 2002; Katz, 1996). Interpretation has become central to both children and adults as they participate in the process of early education:

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

children interpreting and making sense of the world, and adults observing, reflecting on and interpreting children's behaviour to plan the curriculum and assessment and guide their practice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**All settings, indoor and outdoor, provide educational opportunities. This includes those settings where infants and toddlers spend time**

In the context of the continuing distinction made between care and education in certain countries, a distinction which mirrors that made between play-based and academic models of early education, Caldwell (1989) attempted to find a balance by coining the term 'educare'. This concept was intended to bring together care and education as equally important for curriculum development and pedagogy, and was intended to describe an approach to education that offered *a developmentally appropriate mixture of education and care; of stimulation and nurture; of work and play* (p. 266). Although the term has not really been taken up in the everyday language of early education, it has forced further debate about how best to consider these two interconnected elements of early education and, in particular, how to reconceptualise 'care' so that it ranks equally with education in early educational process and practice (Hayes, 2003a; Karlsson and Pramling, 2003). One of the obstacles to this is the strong association between the concept of care and that of

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

mothering. To move beyond this it is necessary to improve our understanding of what it is to be a caring practitioner<sup>3</sup> and to acknowledge that it goes beyond the notion of 'gentle smiles and warm hugs', which obscures the critical developmental and educational value of early education and the complex intellectual challenge of working with young children (Dalli, 2003).

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

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

If adults are to nurture children's learning they must develop skills of observation and

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

reflection to allow for the non-intrusive planning, which can be seen in well managed and yet reasonably flexible practice, and provision of a learning environment that includes children and supports and extends children's learning. This allows for increased attention to positive interactions between child and adult, and also allows for planning by the adult for future opportunities that might extend the child's own learning; it gives a role to the adult which takes the child as central. It encourages the movement away from the more traditional, organisational/management role of the practitioner evident from

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

the research into Irish practice with young children in primary schools (Hayes, 2004; Murphy, 2004). It also strengthens the focus on the pedagogical role of the adult, sometimes absent in more play-based settings (Hayes, O'Flaherty and Kernan, 1997; Weikart, Olmsted and Montie, 2003). A nurturing pedagogy fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge, between children and adults, within the context of an emerging curriculum responsive to the child in the immediate now. This pedagogy highlights the importance of initial and continuing professional development for the adult.

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

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

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

## Education, care and policy development

The degree to which a state involves itself in early education and the extent to which early education is regarded as a care/welfare or an educational aspect of policy influences the funding, focus and the status of early education and, in turn, the process of early education itself. From the thematic review of early childhood education and care policy across twelve countries carried out by the OECD (2000, 2006) it is evident that reasons for investing in early education are embedded in cultural and societal

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

beliefs about young children, the role of the family and of government and the purposes of early education. For instance, the majority of early years services in Italy, Scandinavia and New Zealand are developed as a support to parents and their children. They are state-supported for all children and no distinction is drawn between the care and educational dimensions (Moss, 2006). The services offered tend to be full day and available to the majority of children. In Italy, government-supported voluntary preschool education attracts 94% of three to five year olds (Corsaro, 2003).

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

On the other hand, in Ireland, England, Northern Ireland and the U.S. - the Anglo-American approach - there is a clear policy distinction drawn between care and education. In these countries, children typically attend primary school from the age of 4/5 years. Those early educational, or preschool services outside the school system and receiving state funding are largely supported as part-day educational intervention for disadvantaged children and their families (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2001; Hayes, 2001; OECD, 2000). They are targeted at children considered to be at risk

in terms of their linguistic and cognitive development and often include a compensatory education dimension to their programmes to give children a 'headstart' before they enter elementary school. In Ireland, the Rutland Project and the Early Start programme are examples of this type of provision (Hayes, 2001; Ireland, 1999a). In these countries the majority of early years provision outside the primary school system is considered to be childcare and is regulated, in the main, as a health, safety and welfare, rather than education, service. While receiving some state support in certain circumstances it is mainly privately funded as either a 'for-profit' or 'not for profit' service.

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



## Figure 1 : Typology of early childhood systems

### **High Investment Public Provision Model:**

Found essentially in the Nordic countries. Children's rights to society's resources are widely recognised. Investment is over 1% of GDP. Programmes are designed to support the developmental potential of young children and the needs of working parents. Little difference is made between care and education and services and investment patterns across the age group 1-6 years are continuous and integrated. This has been termed the Social Democratic Welfare State.

### **Low to Mid-Investment Pre-primary Model:**

Found in most European countries (outside Nordic group). Government provides large scale educational services from 3 or 4 years to compulsory school age. Political discourse focuses on learning and laying the foundation for literacy and numeracy. Public investment is 0.4 to 1 percent of GDP. This has been termed the Conservative Welfare State.

### **Low Public Investment, Mixed Market Model:**

Found in **Ireland**, Australia, Canada, Korea and the US. High value is placed on individual family responsibility for young children. National early childhood policies have traditionally been weak. Several departments share responsibility for policies affecting young children. The childcare sector is weakly regulated and conceived of as a service for working mothers. Public investment is less than 0.5% of GDP. This has been termed the Liberal Welfare State.

Source: Adapted from Bennett, 2005.

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

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

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

Ireland's unprecedented economic growth, its subsequent impact on labour market behaviour and the increasingly diverse population have been important factors in the increased investment in, and policy attention to, early childhood care and education over the last decade (Hayes and Bradley, 2006; NWCI, 2005). As demand for early years places intensified, the consequences of the *laissez faire* approach adopted by successive governments became evident with many families experiencing substantial difficulties in balancing their work and family responsibilities. The historical position of women as carers within the home and the traditional approach adopted by successive governments, where care for children was viewed as a private matter has shifted, as the incidence of both parents earning becomes a regular pattern of family life. The long-standing neglect of early years services has meant that families have limited and costly choices and children are subject to services of variable quality with little guarantee of appropriate developmental

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

care, education and support. The increasing pressure on the State to address and respond to shortages coincided with a more powerful ideological movement toward recognising the value of quality early childhood care and education to children in their own right. Consequently, all services accessed by children should reflect, at their core, the needs and rights of children as individual citizens within a democratic society.

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

Liberal welfare states invest in educational services for primary, secondary and third-level students but steer clear of direct investment/subsidisation of early childhood care and education. Instead they employ a universal child benefit, which they argue can be used by parents to subsidise childcare costs if they so desire. In Ireland, child benefit payments increased substantially between 2000 and 2005 to address the two issues of child poverty and childcare. The 2006 budget introduced a new payment to parents, the Early Childhood Supplement (ECS). This annual payment of €1,000 for each child under 6 years is available to all parents and will cost the exchequer €350 million per annum (OMC, 2006). While increases in Child Benefit, and other child payments such as the ECS, form the basis for the government’s strategy in tackling both childcare and child poverty, there is no

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

evidence, national or international, that such increases have contributed, or can contribute to the development of accessible, affordable, sustainable, quality early childhood services. Neither have they assisted parents in meeting additional costs of caring for their children, despite the opportunities access to such services provide to parents (in taking up labour market, education or training opportunities) and children (in developmental and learning supports).

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

**Structural adjustments to coordinate the development of the early years sector must be accompanied by associated conceptual adjustments**

The power of the structural over the conceptual in this field should not be underestimated. Recent structural changes made to enhance co-ordination and integration on issues relating to children, culminating in the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), offer an illustration. The OMC has incorporated responsibility for the existing childcare strategy (previously within the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform) and for early education by locating both divisions within the office. However, the new National *Childcare* Investment Programme (emphasis added) launched for 2006 - 2010 to support

and develop a broad range of early years settings, misses the opportunity to capture the message of integration of care and education in the title of the programme. While there may be an explanation for the title of the initiative it is, nonetheless, a lost opportunity.

## Curriculum and practice

The NCCA's consultative document notes that *Early childhood is a time when children learn through caring and nurturing relationships. Side by side with this, there is an understanding of children as a community of intuitive learners with both care and educational needs, and rights* (NCCA, 2004, p. 8).

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

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

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

Such an approach presumes that all minds, even the very young, are capable of holding ideas and beliefs, which through discussion and interaction can be moved towards some shared frame of reference. *It is not simply that this mutualist view is 'child-centred' but it is much less patronising towards the child's mind. It attempts to build on exchange of understanding between the teacher and the child: to find in the*

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

*intuitions of the child the roots of systematic knowledge, as Dewey urged* (Bruner, 1996, p.57). This is also reflected in the highly regarded

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

Reggio Emilia approach, where children are characterised as strong and competent and the adults working with them listen carefully to their *hundred languages* (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1995).

Dewey's view of learning as the remaking of the old through union with the new resonates with contemporary attention to the wider context of learning. It captures the idea of construction and reconstruction of knowledge. From this

perspective learning is characterised as active, social, dynamic and transforming. The actual process is a central element of the educational experience and one which deserves analysis in and of itself - resonating with the dynamic, bio-ecological model of human development proposed by Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In many ways Dewey's views of child development and learning, which were ahead of their time, suffered from the absence of a contemporary psychological framework. Data emerging from current child development research support many of Dewey's assertions about how best to facilitate learning in a way that is meaningful to both child and a democratic society (Hilgard, 1996; Hayes, 2004).

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

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

continuous process of education in practice – for both the child and the adult – is a challenge for early education.

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

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

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

One of the major problems resulting from the ongoing arguments over curriculum

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

types, goals and methods is that both sides in the struggle may overlook curriculum and practice methods beyond the traditional dichotomy, which can be seen to mirror the education and care dichotomy. The results of many studies suggest that both sides underemphasise and undervalue a third option – namely, curriculum and pedagogy that address children’s current interest and the progress of their intellectual development, as distinct from the direct instruction emphasis on academic learning and future outcomes or the child-initiated learning emphasis on children’s play and self-initiated learning in the immediate present (Banks, 2000; Katz, 1999a, 1999b).

**The integration and synthesis of care and education, practically and conceptually, is the basis for a nurturing pedagogy approach in early education**

This third approach is an integrating approach and focuses on the processes in the learning environment. Proponents argue that the curriculum is located within a firm set of principles rather than guided by a set of short-term objectives or goals. These principles allow early education to meet the immediate learning needs of the child while also allowing the adult to plan for future development and learning in line with the individual child’s own interest, experience and developmental level. This integration and synthesis of care and education is the basis for

proposing a nurturing pedagogical approach (Hayes, 2003a, 2004).

## Towards effective learning

The shift in attention away from what we should teach young children in early education has led to questions about how best to achieve ‘effective learning’ through ‘effective teaching’. There is sufficient understanding of development and learning to describe what ‘effective learning’ might look like in practice. In their description of *intelligence-in-practice*, Resnick & Nelson-Le Gall (1997) capture some of the features of effective learning. Children who are considered ‘intelligent-in-practice’ believe that they have the right (and the obligation) to understand and make things work; that problems can be analysed, that solutions often come from such analysis and that they are capable of that analysis. They have a variety of problem-solving skills and good intuitions about when to use them; they know how to ask questions, seek help and get



enough information to solve problems and have habits of mind, or dispositions, that lead them to actively use these various skills and strategies for acquiring information. Central to this development is the learner's identity of self as a learner and a sense of belonging to the learning community (Carr, 1998; Pascal & Bertram, 1993; Sylva, 1994a). This attention to the active participation of the child resonates with parallel developments with respect to children's rights and children's visibility in the learning process in general. It challenges educators and policy makers to consider what it means to facilitate such active participation, particularly with children from birth to six years.

Bruner (1996) contends that

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

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

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

Fostering the development of both the metacognitive and affective dimension of learning in early education can enable children to become ready, willing and able learners (Claxton, 1990; Carr, 2001b). Such development and learning is

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

particularly important in young children as it facilitates the acquisition, comprehension, retention and application of what is learned, assists learning efficiency, critical thinking and problem-solving and gives children control or self-regulation over thinking and

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

learning processes and products (Hartman, 1998; Kuhn, 1999; Larkin, 2002). For practitioners to assist this process they must consider how best to facilitate the development of affective competence, metacognitive awareness and management of cognitive processes within each child. They must, in essence, assist children in learning how to learn, in recognising themselves as competent and masterful learners who can explore and problem-solve and are sufficiently self-aware to

seek assistance when necessary. The language and content context for such practice is guided by the experiences and interests of the children augmented by the practitioner's ability to extend such experience and interest.

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

A nurturing pedagogy fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge. Where the adult is observing and listening to young children and reflecting on these observations, the curriculum plan is based on engagement with children, assessment of their interests and developmental level as well as their needs and the aims of education. Through a reflective and nurturing pedagogy adults can also identify difficulties in individual development and move to address them, either in the context of the classroom setting or through outside interventions and supports. Implicit in the concept of a nurturing pedagogy is the idea that pedagogy is an integrating process, a guide to an emergent and responsive curriculum (Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001; Edwards et al, 1995) and a medium for assessment (Carr, 2001a; Rogoff, 1997). Finally, a nurturing pedagogy extends the

underlying idea of respect for the child as a participating partner in the learning process while at the same time recognising and articulating a mechanism for respecting the dual nature of early education as care and education.

## Professional development for early childhood care and education

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

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

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

Carr, 2001a; David, 1999b; Katz, 1996; Nutbrown, 1996). Such practices are the manifestation of a nurturing pedagogy and embody a trust in the educative value of care in early education.

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

Johnson (1988) believes that all practitioners come to their practice with informal theories about children's learning and development, informed by their training and their experiences. They derive these from experience and often own them much more readily than they accept the implications of theory and research from so called child development experts. These implicit beliefs that practitioners have about child development and how children learn are termed 'folk pedagogy' by Bruner (1996) and do need to be challenged in the context of contemporary understandings. Professional education and training for early education practitioners must include a strong element of child development along with subject knowledge and principles of practice. The potential of the concept of a nurturing pedagogy as an integrating mechanism for care and education and a challenge to mainstream training for those working with children in education and care contexts has been considered (Hayes, 2004; Petrie, 2004). Petrie notes that at *--the level of practice pedagogy could foster a unifying ethos across*

*settings and age groups, with many workers in the children's sector reconstructed as pedagogues, sharing common values and approaches (Petrie, 2004, p. 295).*

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

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

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

If we are to move towards a real acknowledgement of the critical value of both care and education in all early years settings we will also have to contend with the implications this will have for the professionalisation of the sector. A well-educated workforce working directly with children, sensitive to the complexity of the role, will enhance the quality of early learning experiences for children and ultimately benefit us all (Petrie, 2004; Cameron, 2004). Continuity of experience for children within and across settings, through a shared understanding of practice among practitioners, can contribute to limiting any negative impact of transitions across different settings and facilitate and enhance learning. The opportunities presented by a shift of focus from the care and education dichotomy to a consideration of the integrated, and integrating process of

early childhood care and education are extensive and challenging. They require a significant change in understanding early education at a policy and practice level and a reform in the education of all those working with children in early years settings. These opportunities and challenges provide a rich environment in which to develop an early childhood care and education system that reflects contemporary Ireland and draws on international research within our unique cultural context to the benefit of all our children.

## Concluding comment

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

A significant shift in understanding the role of care in practice requires an explicit acknowledgement of the critical contribution of the interpersonal aspect of early education. To emphasise this it has been argued that there is a need to reconceptualise care as nurture in order that its status as an educative dimension be enhanced. The caring responsibility of the adult – where it recognises that care should be more than merely ‘minding’ - gives an enhanced educational role to it. The idea of considering care as nurture gives it an active connotation with a responsibility on the adult to provide nurturance and foster learning rather than to simply mind or protect the child.

Such a shift in emphasis would raise the expectations we have of practitioners in early education. The role of the adult is crucial and multi-faceted and ranges from listener,

questioner, advisor, to demonstrator, actor, sympathiser, negotiator, assessor and guide. It also includes the role of 'learner', a reflective observer of children who learns from observation and uses this as the basis for pedagogical practice. If adults are to nurture children's learning as part of the educative process they must develop skills of observation and reflection to allow for the non-intrusive planning and provision of a learning environment that supports and extends children's own learning. In order to nurture an adult must inter-actively nourish, rear, foster, train and educate the child. To nurture requires an engaged, bidirectional level of interaction and confers on the early years practitioner an enhanced, educational role. Such an approach extends the underlying idea of respect for the child as a participating partner in the learning process while at the same time recognising and articulating a mechanism for respecting the dual nature of early education as care and education.

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

A nurturing pedagogy allows for positive interactions between child and adult but also allows for planning by the adult for future opportunities that might extend the child's own learning; it gives a role to the adult which takes the child as central. It fosters the processes of interaction, dialogue and planning leading to the shared construction of knowledge. Where the adult is observing and listening to young children and reflecting on these observations, the curriculum plan is based on an assessment of their interests and developmental level as well as their needs and the aims of education. A reflective and nurturing pedagogy allows for attention to individual development and moves to address difficulties, should they emerge, either in the context of the immediate setting or through outside interventions and supports.

Central to the concept of a nurturing pedagogy is the idea that pedagogy provides a unique integration space for care and education and is, itself, a form of assessment and a guide to an emergent and responsive curriculum. Curriculum, assessment and practice are intimately intertwined in early education and care. To progress change in Irish early education policy and practice it will be necessary for there to be structural reform, already beginning with the establishment of an Early Childhood Unit within the Office of Minister for Children, and leadership in curricular reform. The current work of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment on developing an early learning framework across the ages from birth to six, in consultation with the whole sector, affords an exciting opportunity to break down structural and psychological barriers for the benefit of children, families and society in general.

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



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