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# Considering Practice in Early Years Settings

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[I]n order to develop . . . a human being, whether child or adult, requires . . . progressively more complex, reciprocal interaction with persons with whom he or she develops a strong, mutual . . . attachment. (Bronfenbrenner & Evans 2000:122)

**T**his book is about early years practice. Practice makes the curriculum visible. It is what we do every day in day-to-day living with young children. It is not a separate activity or a discretely defined part of our behaviour; rather it is a combination of the education and care we provide for young children and through which we exhibit our interest in and understanding of how we educate our youngest children. This book is not a handbook or a manual. It is written on the assumption that the reader – whether student or practitioner<sup>1</sup> – is keen to learn more about practice and the elements that go to make up the rich, nurturing and enhancing worlds of early years settings. The book is intended to be the starting point for a collective conversation about early years practice that is derived from our knowledge and experiences. It is a conversation with many participants; a space where the ideas and arguments of the book form the basis of further conversations and discussions to maintain the flexible, responsive and flowing process that is early years practice. It is intended to be a conversation that can be returned to reflectively, either alone or with colleagues.

As with any conversation, it is important that participants know what values, beliefs and understandings inform different perspectives. It is also important to develop a shared language.

Researchers tell us that the quality of a child's early years experiences is crucial for overall learning and development and can have a profound impact on later life success. The quality of these experiences depends on a number of factors, and one of the central

<sup>1</sup> A range of titles are used for professionals in the field of early childhood education, but in this book I will use the term 'practitioner' to refer to those working with children from birth to six years of age. This captures childminders, preschool staff, teachers and students in practice.

influencing factors is the style and content of the day-to-day practice of the early years practitioner. We also know that if practice is to be effective in supporting learning and development it must be informed by theory; that is, we must know *what we do* and *why we do it*. The most effective practices are those that are guided by clearly understood principles and informed by a solid understanding of learning and development. It is therefore important that practitioners feel confident in discussing and reflecting on the principles of their practice, their pedagogy. Ireland has seen a rapid growth in early years provision over the last decade and the training necessary to bring all practitioners up to a minimum level of qualification is still under way. However, early years practice can be supported and enhanced from within settings and through quality practice placements in training. We are fortunate in Ireland in having two national practice frameworks for working with children from birth to six years – *Síolta*, the national framework for quality, and *Aistear*, the national curriculum framework – which provide a common language and a common frame for developing early years practice. While they are different in their overall focus, they have both emerged from engagement with the early years sector and they share a common set of principles. This provides Irish early years practitioners with a common framework in which to begin the conversations that will articulate and support early years practice.

To that end, this book will discuss what constitutes good practice in early years and exactly why good practice *is* good; it will consider the research evidence on the impact of early experiences on learning and development and it will explore in detail both *Síolta* (CECDE 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA 2009a, 2009b) to illustrate how these two practice frameworks can be used together to enhance the day-to-day practice of early years practitioners and continue to support the learning and development of all children.

From the very beginning of life children are curious and socially competent. They are active in their communication and engagement with the people, places and objects that comprise their learning environments. This view of the child as an engaged, active participant in the world around them reflects the growing scientific understanding we have of the dynamic and interactive process that is child development, and it also reflects a rights-based perspective of children, recognising them as individuals who are learning and developing in the social world. Central to children's learning and development are the many relationships in which they participate in all their learning environments. While the various social relationships children form with adults and other children are important, their interactions and relationships with materials and objects are also important.

The role of the adult in all relationships is most effective when 'present' with and for the child in that moment, in an attentive way, within a carefully prepared environment that allows for exploration and play to encourage children to become more self-controlled and self-disciplined in their learning and their relationships. Such a role can often mean standing back and observing, assessing the situations observed and informing future planning and provision.

Right from the start a child's temperament contributes to the quality of their interactions, which in turn impact on other aspects of development such as attention. The adult has a central role in being attuned to such contributions, and able to read the communications carefully and respond sensitively to children's behaviour. Wolfe and Bell (2007) found a relationship between infant temperament and working memory performance in early childhood. These associated characteristics highlight the importance of early learned regulatory and attentional behaviours and the impact of these early skills on later development.

The early years practitioner works as part of a complex and dynamic context, whether in the home or in a specialised early years setting. To develop and sustain quality early years practice, which is both personally satisfying and positive for young children, it is valuable to recognise that there is a rich theoretical and conceptual backdrop to good-quality, effective practice. Recognising what high-quality early years practice looks and feels like in an early years setting allows the practitioner to reflect on their own day-to-day practice and contributes to the virtuous cycle of learning and developing.

However, quality is a difficult concept to define and some authors suggest that trying to define it is like searching for 'fools' gold' (Penn 2009). Nonetheless in practice we should be questioning the quality of our practice, challenging ourselves and others to consider what quality might mean for a particular setting or child at a particular time. To achieve this, there are advantages in keeping up to date with contemporary research and pooling insights from neuroscience with developmental psychology, education and other disciplines to highlight the connectedness between the social, physical, linguistic, cognitive and emotional experiences of young children and associated implications for practice and for learning and optimal development (Dalli *et al.* 2011).

Practice is about the care and attention we give to the child 'in the now' when we think of the 'whole child in context'. This attention to the 'now' is most effective when it is practised by adults who know what their practice is and why it is as it is. It goes beyond naming the constructs of early education and care into the translation of those constructs into the day-to-day relationship with and between adults and children. Knowing and understanding the science of development and learning and continually updating this knowledge through accessing relevant resources helps to make sense of why certain practices are worthwhile and others less so. It provides a language and a voice in which we can articulate, discuss and explain what we do, because we have evidence to support us. This in turn allows us to consider our own practice in a more rigorous way, giving us confidence that what we do is appropriate, beyond the mere opinion that 'we know it works'. Knowing how children learn and develop helps us explain why what we do is so important and a unique feature of the early years period of education.

## **CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS FOR EARLY YEARS PRACTICE**

Young children learn and develop in the midst of society and they are influenced not

only by their immediate environments but also by the policies that support and assist families in raising children and the attitudes and values that societies have in respect of children and families. A number of international and national developments can be seen as directly influencing the daily work of practitioners in early childhood settings. Internationally one of the defining moments in relation to our approach to children came in 1989 with the publication of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Ratified by Ireland in 1992, this document is a profound commitment to children and young people and lays out a blueprint for how we, as adults, can respect and support children and young people. It has shaped the contemporary image of the child as an active participant in his or her own learning and development.

Specifically in relation to early education, which is not a named right in the Convention, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has issued a General Comment No. 7 on 'Implementing Child Rights in Early Childhood' (2005). The general comment recognises early childhood as a critical period for realising children's rights and elaborates, in some detail, how early childhood services can provide for young children in a rights-based framework. Hayes and Kernan (2008) noted that globalisation and mobility has also had an impact on how society considers children, with increased attention to the centrality of principles of social inclusion and respect for diversity reflecting the growing heterogeneity of societies. Specifically in relation to early childhood, there has been a growth in the professionalisation and recognition of the early years workforce through expanded training opportunities and expectations. This is evidenced in the vibrant national and international community of early years professionals, academics and policy thinkers. At a policy level, the recognition of the importance of early childhood is evidenced by, among other international initiatives, the Start Strong initiative from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which continues to provide a rich source of information on international themes and practice supports through its early childhood education and care toolbox (OECD 2012). The European Union (EU) has become increasingly interested in the area of quality early childhood in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission 2010) and a number of Council of Europe reports have identified quality early education for children as central to the successful implementation of labour market initiatives and the concept of lifelong learning.

For many years Ireland had a limited involvement in the lives of young children and there was minimum attention to or support for the development of an early years sector. In response to the increasing demands for provision arising from changing family structures and work patterns, there has been unprecedented investment in the expansion of places and the infrastructure to manage such developments. The growth of local childcare support networks and improved co-ordination across the national voluntary organisations has given an increased visibility to the sector that was missing in the 1990s. The National Children's Strategy (2000) recognised that children are active agents in their development and that they both affect and are affected by the

environments within which they grow. This view of the ‘whole child’ has informed the wide variety of policies, strategies and regulations impacting on the lives of children that have emerged over the last decade. The establishment in 2011 of the Ministry for Children and Youth Affairs – incorporating the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) – has the potential to enhance cohesion and integration across the range of policy issues impacting directly on young children’s lives, including early years provision. The ministry’s lead on the development of an Early Years Strategy has important implications for the landscape of early childhood education and care over the next decade.

Early years practice must also conform to a number of legal requirements and national standards and guidelines. In the Irish context the key regulations are the Child Care (Pre-School Services) (No. 2) Regulations (2006). Of particular relevance to the topic of early years practice is Regulation 5 on the Health, Welfare and Development of the Child, which notes that ‘Each child’s learning, development and well being needs should be met within the daily life of a service through the provision of the appropriate opportunities, experiences, activities, interactions and materials’ (DoHC 2006:36). Early years services must also comply with employment and health and safety legislation. A number of practice guidelines and standards should inform early years practice, including *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework (CECDE 2006), *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA 2009a), the National Standards for Pre-School Services (DoH 2010), Diversity and Equality Guidelines (OMC 2006) and *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DCYA 2011). Information and details on all the above can be accessed through the relevant websites. The purpose of these regulations, standards and guidelines is to draw attention to the critical role of all professionals, including early years practitioners, in working with and protecting children and to provide a robust system within which children are protected and allowed to develop in safe, healthy and enhancing environments.

At a local level there has been funding for the county/city childcare committees to develop policies and resources to support and enhance the quality of provision. This has been accompanied by national initiatives involving the early years sector in its widest sense. This approach was particularly evident in the development and publication of *Siolta* (in 2006) and *Aistear* (in 2009), which created a rich basis for considering practice within services for young children. There are also a number of financial supports available to settings, including the capitation subsidy for providing the Free Preschool Year. In an effort to support and enhance the quality of practice within this initiative, incentives are also available to settings to employ qualified staff, and this move is also supported by the commitments on training reported in the *Workforce Development Plan* (DES 2010). These initiatives provide Ireland with the structures and the opportunity to follow other countries towards supporting and developing a graduate-led, diverse professional base to enhance the quality of service provision and the experiences of young children.

### UNDERSTANDING CONTEMPORARY CHILDHOODS

The active and competent nature of all children, whatever their age, is recognised in our National Children’s Strategy, which puts forward the following vision for Irish children:

An Ireland where children are respected as young citizens with a valued contribution to make and a voice of their own; where all children are cherished and supported by family and the wider society; where they enjoy a fulfilling childhood and realise their potential. (DoHC 2000: 4)

It is clear from the above that Ireland recognises that children are active agents in their development. This point is further strengthened later in the strategy: ‘children affect and are in turn affected by the relationships around them’ (DoHC 2000:26). As active participants in our society, children have a right to expect that their early childhood settings, wherever they are and of whatever type, will challenge and excite them, provide safety and security and enhance their overall development and learning.

Children are the social group most affected by the quality of early childhood services. While this may appear self-evident, there may also be some complacency about what actually happens to children in their everyday experiences and a general assumption that by just attending an early years setting children will develop and progress positively. This is not the case and research evidence suggests that to achieve positive outcomes in children attending early years settings they must be of high quality, particularly for children who may be identified as coming from more disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that low-quality early years experiences are of little or no benefit to young children and their families (Sylva *et al.* 2011). In fact the quality of everyday experiences in early years environments – wherever children are – has a profound influence on them. Young children are not merely recipients or consumers of a service but are deeply influenced, individually and collectively, by their early years experiences.

Children learn in context; the ordinary spaces, places and people they encounter make up that context. Adults who are attuned, who are ‘watchfully attentive’ and who are mindful in their day-to-day practices with children can make an important and positive contribution to their learning and development. There is no need to distance children from society in an effort to enhance their learning and development – indeed, actively linking early years settings to other important environments in the lives of young children and carefully managing the various transitions they make is seen as an important dimension of quality early years practice. Early years practice is a process that is happening in early years settings every day; it is the curriculum made visible – even where the curriculum may not be readily definable.

This book is intended as a contribution to explaining why practice is so critical, what it is about quality practice that has such a huge impact on young children’s

learning and development, and why. Early years settings – including the home environment – are complex learning environments with many overlapping interactions between children, adults, materials and ideas.

In addition to being influenced by the learning environment and the people therein, children are also influenced by the beliefs others have about how and what they should learn. Children learn in social and physical environments, developmental niches (Super & Harkness 1986), the characteristics of which are, to a large extent, determined by adults but are also influenced by other elements. Based on their beliefs about development and their expectations, adults select and provide experiences they believe are important for children and will prepare children for their future. These socialisation processes occur at different levels and so can be studied at different levels.

We all carry beliefs about children, how they develop, what they need, how best to ensure the best for them, how to encourage good behaviour and so forth. In previous writing I have identified some basic core beliefs I have about early childhood (Hayes 2010). I restate them here because I believe it is important that each reader understands what informs the points I make about early years practice. In presenting them I hope that you can draw on your own beliefs and your experiences of early years practice to reflect on what they might mean to you. If you have different priorities or beliefs, it is useful to name them and to consider why this might be the case.

First, I hold the child as *central*. Each child is an individual born into a particular socio-cultural context. It is within this context that the child develops and, in turn, influences context. In working with children we must take the time and interest to develop our own skills and knowledge to allow for the individuality of each child to flourish. Second, I believe that the child is basically *good*. No child is born bad, although many are born with considerable disadvantages. It is essential that early years practitioners believe this. Underpinning more rigid practices and punitive styles is the belief that children need to be taught to be good. Rather, I believe they need to be rewarded for behaving as we expect them to and assisted in understanding why certain behaviours are considered inappropriate. Third, I consider that in our tendency to segment the child as we try to unravel the influences that shape her life we must not lose sight of the *interaction* between different aspects of development at different stages. The holistic development of the whole child in context is what we must strive to achieve in our planning and practice. Fourth, I believe that the child is an *active agent* in her learning rather than a passive receiver of information. This belief has serious implications for practice and requires that adults allow children the freedom to make mistakes, to solve problems and to find solutions rather than interfering too soon in an activity or rushing to show children how, for instance, to ‘draw the cat’ or ‘cut out the picture’. Fifth, I believe in the *importance* of the early years. I do not hold the extreme view that there is no hope for change after the child has reached the age of, say, seven. However, I do believe that the foundation for much future learning, behaviour and success is laid down in the very early experiences of a child. It is unacceptable to say that a trauma will affect a young child less than an older one simply because they do not



appear to understand it – it is this very fact of childhood understanding that makes early experiences so important, and that places an important obligation on early years practitioners to be sensitive to children’s experiences and how they might be affecting them. This sensitivity requires that you recognise that what something means to you may not, in fact, reflect what it means to the child. Finally, I believe in the powerful *role of the adult* in the young child’s life. The quality of interactions and relationships is emerging from scientific research as a key factor in enhancing the learning and development of young children. Adults are significant in that they can expand the experiences and the horizons of the child during the early years by their attention, interests, listening skills, observations and the provision of opportunity. Adults must, of course, also recognise their limitations. There are environmental influences and the influence of other adults, for example, that will prevail in certain circumstances (Hayes 2010:viii–ix).

### THE EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONER

Effective early years practice and pedagogy integrates education and care with learning, development and experiences for children. We need to consider and understand exactly what the integration of education and care means in practice, what challenges it poses and what opportunities it can provide. While initial training is important, all early years practitioners benefit from the opportunity for ongoing professional development – whether through externally provided programmes or through an in-house environment that supports reflective and informed practice at the individual and team level. Such opportunities contribute to creating a community of learning, a critical and questioning environment that is alert to the impact and effect of day-to-day practices.

Mitchell and Cubey (2003) identify eight characteristics of a quality approach to professional development that can inform the development of a critical learning path to practice:

- 1 ‘*Incorporate participants’ own aspirations, skills, knowledge and understanding into the learning context.*’ To achieve this there needs to be a safe and open environment that encourages practitioners to look at themselves and their strengths and weaknesses to form the basis of ongoing professional development. It recognises that shared learning can enhance not only an individual’s learning but also the overall quality of the early years environment.
- 2 ‘*Provide theoretical and content knowledge and information about alternative practices.*’ This challenges practitioners to continue to keep up with emerging research and knowledge about early years practice through reading, attending seminars, accessing resource materials and using them as the basis for personal reflection and group discussion.
- 3 ‘*Investigate pedagogy within their own early childhood settings.*’ It is always easiest to start from where you are. Using honest examples or vignettes from your own early

years settings and critically considering them in the context of, for instance, Aistear and Síolta can give ideas on how to progress, enhance or provide the language that allows you to describe your practice more clearly.

- 4 *'Draw on personal experience for data analysis.'* Here the authors identify the practitioner as an active researcher. Carefully documenting observations for later critical analysis enables this type of approach to considering practice and reviewing the effectiveness of certain approaches. It can pose new and unexpected questions and also provide insight into activities or relationships that might be easily overlooked if not recorded and considered.
- 5 *'Provide opportunities for critical reflection to challenge assumptions and extend thinking.'* While it may be simple to quickly review your practice, it is a great deal more difficult, but ultimately more valuable, to critically evaluate your practice to explore the values and beliefs that influence you. This requires planning and time and so needs local leadership in settings and a commitment from all practitioners.
- 6 *'Support educational practices that are inclusive of diversity.'* We are all different, all unique, and so we all contribute to the diversity of settings. As a result of greater mobility and increased immigration, the extent of diversity in groups has grown and brought with it both riches and challenges. Explicitly discussing diversity in the context of practice provides us with the time and space to plan and develop inclusive early learning environments.
- 7 *'Help participants to change educational practices, beliefs, understanding and attitudes.'* Changing hearts and minds is not easy – even where people are willing to question themselves. It is important that due attention is paid in discussion to the needs and rights of others and that space is allowed for constructive argument and differing views. It is through discussion and argument that we can find new and often better ways to practise.
- 8 *'Help participants to gain awareness of their own thinking, actions and influence.'* In order to grow in awareness we need to have the desire to do so. Where practitioners are collectively committed to achieving the best possible quality of practice there is an aim that can act as the driver for change. Where the context for this element of professional development is a safe one, where participants trust and respect each other, there it is most likely that everyone gains increased awareness of their thinking, their beliefs and how these can impact directly on practice through influencing our responses to behaviour, our expectations of different situations, our tolerance of change. Practitioners who recognise the importance of self-awareness and show a willingness to change and learn are certainly going to be more motivated in their daily work in early years settings than those who have become complacent.

Essentially, the points raised by Mitchell and Cubey highlight the importance to practice of engaged, attuned and reflective practitioners and offer some suggestions on how to access those aspects of ourselves that we may not bring to mind in the day-to-day

routine of early years practice but that inform our actions and ultimately influence our interactions with the children in our settings.

Our own history and experiences of learning – even if we are largely unthinking in relation to them – inform and influence our practice in ways that may not always be useful. Fleer (2003) talks about the constraints that can impact on our work if we assume a shared understanding of commonly used references, ideas or constructs. She argues that we need to give more attention to our ‘taken for granted’ or tacit knowledge and how it can impose on our practice. As in many different professional areas there is a language specific to early education. We talk of ‘high-quality early education’; of our practice being ‘child-centred’; we recognise the child as an ‘active agent’ in their learning; we work with the ‘whole child’ and recommend that we listen to the ‘voice of the child’. However, if not used carefully and with thoughtful reflection, these concepts can become meaningless. We need to know exactly what we mean when we say we work with the ‘whole child’. We need to know why we believe this to be important. Unless we truly understand what we mean when we use these important concepts to explain our practice, we may in fact strip away the rich and unique features of early education. Fleer warns against the limiting nature of what she calls this ‘taken for granted’ knowledge that can become part of the language of early education. She argues that it is important for practitioners – if they are to practise in effective and dynamic ways – to interrogate such ‘taken for granted’ ideas; to unpack what they really mean and to share our understandings with colleagues so that a common understanding of practice emerges.

Just speaking the language of early childhood is not sufficient – the real challenge is to take language and get behind the real meaning. However, understanding the meaning only becomes real in a social context – it is socially constructed – and we adults can experience this through reflecting and challenging our own ‘taken for granted’ practice with others with the aim of actually reframing our practice in light of new understandings. Johnson (1988) believes that all those working in education come to their practice with informal theories about children’s learning and development, informed by their training and their own experiences. As they derive from our own learning experiences, we often own them much more readily than we accept the implications of theory and research from so-called child development experts. Our implicit beliefs about child development and how children learn, termed ‘folk pedagogy’ by Bruner (1996), do need to be challenged in the context of contemporary understandings. Training for working in early education must include a strong element of child development along with content or subject knowledge and principles of practice.

We carry tacit knowledge and some of the myths from our past with us into our practice. But the knowledge base around child development and learning is expanding all the time and some of our tacit knowledge may be wrong or out of date. It is important to adopt a critical spirit in our approach to language and our grasp of knowledge and take time to consider the assumptions we make. Unless we are willing to challenge and explore our own assumptions, we may never really provide our young

children with the rich learning environments they need to experience in order to be able to adapt to the changing world.

Of course, the ‘knowledge’ we routinely use provides us with a familiar structure and it may be uncomfortable to reflect on or question it. However, without reflection we merely replicate what we have always done and do not afford a space within which to challenge ourselves and develop our professionalism. The taken for granted – tacit – knowledge is rarely articulated, discussed or made visible; it is just ‘the way things are’. Fler (2003) identifies four of these tacit assumptions, which, she argues, influence early years practice. These four examples of ‘tacit knowledge’, which may be uncritically accepted, are often evident in the language of early years practice. They provide a useful starting point for discussions of beliefs and values we might hold about the way children learn and our role as practitioners in the process.

The first assumption relates to how we position the child. Do we see the child as part of the wider world or as part of the early years setting? This can affect the extent to which we broaden our own and children’s experiences. A child-centred focus can distance the child from the reality of the world, from the world of adults and older children. Fler suggests that we consider a richer concept, one of child-embeddedness, to capture the idea of the child growing and developing as an active participant in the midst of society. Key learning from science and evidence from wider cultural practices illustrate the importance of inclusive, relational, interactional pedagogy. This is a pedagogical approach I describe elsewhere as a nurturing pedagogy (Hayes 2007; Hayes & Kernan 2008). How we consider the child in relation to the world also impacts on how inclusive we intend to be in planning the learning environment. Fler suggests that practitioners reflect on the environmental organisation in early years settings to allow for more fluid circulation with less emphasis on ‘corners’, and a broader range of materials with a wider range of objects that represent more of the ordinary and the familiar to children.

The second assumption Fler considers is how we view children as learners. Do children actively construct knowledge or do they learn from being told? They can be seen as active, participating meaning-makers or as passive recipients of knowledge. The meaning of *active* needs careful consideration. It is not about physical activity alone: it includes being actively engaged in whatever is happening; active listening; and careful, active observation – from careful observation a child may expand what they are doing. There is a key role for the adult here in acting as a model for learning – showing rather than telling. Think about what that might mean to your practice in light of some recent example you can bring to mind. Understanding children’s active engagement allows you to see where and how you might provide them with challenge and work with them in their zone of proximal development (ZPD) – the construct developed by Vygotsky to capture the idea of learners striving towards the next stage.

A third assumption evident in the language of early years refers to how we balance the individual with their social orientation. While it is important to understand the child as an individual, it is also important to see the child as a learner within a group

as well as in an environment specific to the child. While individual development and learning may be a focus, we know that children are social beings, social learners, that while they are independent they are also interdependent. Children like to be with other children; they share knowledge and so extend their knowledge; they enjoy succeeding in groups and learn how to cope with failure too (Kernan & Singer 2010). As adults, we understand the value of working as a team, working together in discussion and in learning. It is similar for even very young children and so we should plan for both the individual developing child and also for the interdependent child.

Finally, Fler questions the assumptions underpinning how we consider conversations. Children are embedded in the social world and are active in their communication with it through various verbal and non-verbal processes. In our practice, do we see both child and adult as partners in learning together, or separate from each other with the adult in the powerful position? While there is of course an inequity between the child and the far more experienced adult, this does not negate the value of considering children as partners. The process of distancing children is well bedded into society and so there is a need for explicit consideration of ‘conversational opportunities’. Carefully planned child-friendly environments facilitate social and collaborative learning. Real, meaningful communication between adults and children (and children and children) is not simply about reading stories or asking questions. In fact, limiting conversation and dialogue to a question and answer style of communication or to organisational and management activities is insufficient and also disrespectful to children. It runs counter to an inclusive and respectful early years pedagogy that underlies a democratic approach to practice, which research suggests equips children with important developmental proficiency.

It is useful to review current understandings of how early years practices impact on children. Such a review can act as a stimulus for practitioners to reflect on their practice and the quality of provision for young children so that the experiences in early years settings will be a positive and affirming one for all those involved. The adult, and their style of engagement, has a profound impact on the learning experiences of children. The contemporary view of children as active agents in their learning requires practitioners to recognise and respond to the reality that even the very youngest children contribute to the context and content of their own development. This is not to underestimate the dependence of the child or the very powerful, protective role of the adult. It does, however, challenge adults to reconsider practice and to take account of the rich and diverse nature of each child when planning early care and education, designing learning environments and providing learning opportunities. The adult sets the scene for children’s sense of engagement with the world and provides a context within which children can be seen and valued for their own sake and in the here and now.

## EARLY YEARS SETTINGS

While the family is recognised as the central space for early education, learning and development, families increasingly share the early care and education of their children

with different types of early years setting. These settings are a part of the wider society and have links with other educational, social and cultural settings in the wider community. They provide an important bridge, for children and parents alike, from the seclusion of the home through the early years setting into the local community and wider society. Early years settings therefore provide an important service for all families, but their role is particularly vital for minority or marginalised parents and their children. While the direct role of the practitioner is often characterised in terms of their work with the children attending settings, it is important to recognise that they play an important indirect role in creating these links across various systems, particularly in relation to influencing and supporting the home learning environment.

Research shows that early childhood experiences are important to children in their daily life and into their future. Children are deeply influenced, individually and collectively, by their early years experiences. The quality of everyday experiences in the early years – wherever children are – has a profound influence on them. Indeed, it is the day-to-day interactions and experiences that drive their development. They are active participants in our society and have a right to expect that early childhood settings will challenge and excite them, provide safety and security and enhance their overall development and learning. Viewing children as participants in the early childhood process allows adults to work with children as well as provide for children. In general, children are motivated to learn, to seek meaning in their world, and they expect that the adults they meet will assist them in this endeavour. It is in the immediate, day-to-day experiences that children learn about the world around them; the ordinary things in their lives have the potential to be extra-ordinary, to act as the foundation for new knowledge. The adult can help make experiences of the ordinary into rich and meaningful learning experiences by using careful observation and reflection to inform their practice and their engagement with children. Through informed and attuned practice adults can expand children's language, thinking and understandings, they can fire children's curiosity, imagination and creativity, and challenge and extend their skills through encouraging mastery and positive learning dispositions.

Children's curiosity and desire for knowledge is evident in their play, their exploration, their questions and their behaviour. In order to make the most of their early years, children need adults who trust them, adults who are excited, inspired and challenged by them. If the child is seen as the centre of practice the day-to-day curriculum will reflect this. In early years settings with good-quality practices the adults actively include children in the regular experiences of the setting, engage with children and learn from them, and enhance the learning opportunities for them. This approach to practice is informed by a belief in the active nature of child development and includes the child as a partner in development. Such an approach to practice reflects a shift away from a more traditional didactic practice to a more integrated, social and interactive approach.

The design, organisation and resourcing of the early years setting is central to practice and the early learning process. Settings, both indoor and outdoor, should be

safe while also providing rich and varied opportunities for exploration, play and risk-taking. However, while planning and organising the setting is important in early years practice, it is insufficient in itself. We know from research that settings that meet the static requirements of quality may not be effective in enhancing children's learning and development because it is the process, what happens on a day-to-day basis, that is at the heart of quality early years practice. Research suggests that the most effective practice is found in settings with well-trained, well-informed staff who are familiar with child development and subject material, who recognise and respond to the dynamic and individual nature of development in the early years, and who can work with an emerging curriculum that is driven by the interests and experiences of the children and the opportunities afforded by the environment (OECD 2006). A curriculum framework, such as Aistear, provides a rich basis for such practice. Cultivating positive learning dispositions and feelings in young children leads to positive outcomes in social, linguistic and cognitive development and the skills necessary for later school success. It is a holistic, adaptive and, ultimately, more effective approach to early education. The process of quality practice is dynamic and interactive, reflecting the dynamic and interactive nature of learning and development, and it requires that practitioners are responsive and reflective throughout both their planning for and their engagement with children.

Implicit in the practice outlined above is a commitment to democratic principles that recognise the need to respect and engage meaningfully with children. This approach is reflective of an understanding of early childhood education and care settings as sites of democratic practice where children and adults can participate collectively in interpreting experiences and shaping decisions affecting themselves (Moss 2007). Changing practice to meet the new vision of early years practice, a vision based on scientific understanding of development and contemporary approaches to children, is not an easy task. It requires ongoing practice, learning and reflection so that we get it right from the start and continue getting it right.

This book is intended as a contribution to:

- widening our common understanding of and language about why practice is so critical
- recognising what it is about quality practice that has such a huge impact on young children's learning and development
- understanding why the quality of practice is so important.

While it includes illustrative examples, this is not a book of examples of 'good' practice; rather, it is intended to prompt discussion and reflection on the quality of practice in the average early years setting, drawing on the experience of the practitioner or student, and to provide opportunities for considering everyday practice in the context of the two pillars of practice, *Síolta* and *Aistear*. It provides readers with a research context that will help locate quality early years practice within a shared language, reflecting a shared understanding. It does so by illustrating points of practice, with reference to

examples drawn from both *Síolta* and *Aistear*, and explores why practice is important and what aspects of practice matter most to positive child development and professional satisfaction. It is not a manual of exercises; it is intended to be the start of an ongoing conversation towards strengthening our understanding of the impact of early years experiences on children and their families, and providing the sector with a shared language with which to raise the awareness of others of the importance of this period of education and the critical role played by early years practitioners.

Rather than approaching the use of *Síolta* in terms of ‘doing this or that standard’, or *Aistear* by way of attending to this particular theme or that principle, this book suggests that you look to your own practice and derive your use of the frameworks directly from it. You are probably already doing much of what is suggested in the illustrations, but you may not be reflecting on it or theorising it sufficiently to fully understand – and evaluate – the potential impact on the learning and development of the young children in your setting. This is as true of the childminder with a small number of children in her own home as it is of students in practice or those working in more formal settings. Maximising the use of *Síolta* and *Aistear* in the infant classes of the primary school is a particular challenge because teachers are trained specifically to implement a prescribed curriculum, which is quite different from the curricular framework proposed by *Aistear*.

This chapter has considered what high-quality early years practice is and has raised a number of opportunities and challenges to achieving such practice. The next chapter considers the research that explains why this quality practice is important and how it impacts on children’s development and learning. Chapter 3 reviews the development of *Síolta* and *Aistear* and presents the similarities and differences between these two important early years practice documents. In each of Chapters 4–7, we take one of the *Aistear* themes, discuss the focus of the theme and, drawing on illustrations of practice from *Aistear*, present an integrated approach to linking *Aistear* and *Síolta* in practice by working across the Standards and Components of *Síolta* and the Learning Goals and Aims of *Aistear*. Chapter 8, the final chapter, reviews the previous chapters in order to present an integrated reflection on early years practice. This reflection is intended as a contribution to the conversation proposed above, so that we can all work towards achieving, supporting and sustaining high-quality early years practice that gets it right from the start.