

Chapter 9

Overview and Conclusions

9.1 Introduction

This chapter summarises some of the key issues that emerged from the profiling of countries in the last chapter. It is evident that there is much difference in the way in which quality is defined, measured and supported amongst the countries included in the review. These differences included differences in welfare regimes, understandings of children, qualifications and working conditions of the workforce, amount of public investment, whether regulations are imposed nationally, locally or by the State or regional government and the range of measures adopted to support quality improvements. Despite this, there were also many similarities between countries. Measures such as a curriculum framework were adopted by some countries for all ECCE provision, by others for pre-school provision and in other countries by the sector itself in an attempt to improve the standard of care offered. The information gathered provides a range of possibilities for the future development of quality in Ireland.

9.2 Context

One key issue to emerge was the importance of a co-ordinated and integrated policy framework for ECCE. In some countries this has been achieved by locating responsibility for all ECCE services with a single government department, in some instances, ECCE has been integrated into the education system. For example, a unified system of care and education is an important feature of ECCE in Sweden, where there is a single framework for a child's educational experience at pre-primary, first and second level education.

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Other countries have attempted to establish structures to ensure improved co-ordination between government departments regarding developments in ECCE.

9.3 Defining Quality

Quality is defined in a variety of different ways by different countries. Some countries focus on structural features of quality, such as premises, staff-child ratios and group size (Germany). Countries such as Norway, Sweden and New Zealand have moved to include process features in their definition of quality. In these countries the curriculum plays a key role in expanding the definition of quality to include process features. The adoption of a broad curriculum framework is a key tool utilised in defining quality in ECCE in these countries. The educational levels, training requirements and working conditions of staff in both of the Nordic countries is high and both countries have well developed systems of in-service training for centre based services. A benchmark qualification for those working in the ECCE has been laid down in New Zealand. A highly qualified staff is viewed as essential for the development of quality in these countries. Parents' involvement is also defined as an important aspect of quality in some countries, with countries such as Norway and Portugal legislating for the involvement of parents in early education services.

9.4 Measuring Quality

Countries that focus on structural aspects of quality use inspection as the main mechanism in the monitoring of quality. Countries with more developed ECCE systems moved from a model of inspection based on assessment to one based on a partnership approach with providers, where their role was to provide support and

assistance to providers in improving quality. One notable trend was a growth in the use of evaluations, both in terms of evaluations forming the basis for government monitoring of ECCE services and in terms of the inclusion of processes of self-review on the part of the provider as part of the inspection process. The provision of support and assistance to providers in implementing features such as a curriculum framework and the adoption of an evaluative approach to measuring quality allows for a broader definition of quality, which is inclusive of process quality indicators and for the continuous improvement in the quality of provision offered by the provider. When measuring quality in a more evaluative way, the development and provision of high quality resources for use by childcare providers is important.

9.5 Supporting Quality

There were many measures introduced in an attempt to support and improve the quality of ECCE services in the countries included in this review. It should be noted that the countries with the widest range of mechanisms introduced by the government to support and improve quality were the English speaking countries; countries where childcare provision is primarily reliant on the private market. Measures introduced to support and improve quality in these countries included accreditation schemes and the provision of resources such as *The Quality Journey* in New Zealand. The Nordic countries did not adopt many measures for supporting quality. This reflected the broad definition of quality in these countries and the comparatively high quality of care and education generally provided.

When examining the ways in which quality was supported in the countries included in the review, approaches included the use of networks to support ECCE practitioners,

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the use of pedagogical documentation, the provision of training and professional development opportunities, an innovative Kindergarten building programme, the introduction of a curriculum and the provision of resources to adequately support measures to improve the quality of care and education offered. Research projects, focused on the issue of high quality in ECCE have commenced in some countries, while the Nordic countries collect and collate statistics annually on a range of structural indicators of quality.

9.6 Implications for Ireland

One important question in light of this review is the implications for quality in the Irish context. Ireland most broadly fits into the Anglo-Saxon/liberal welfare regime in terms of Esping-Andersen's Typology of Welfare States (Esping-Andersen, 1990). However, to look at potential directions of quality in Ireland solely in relation to those countries with liberal welfare regimes negates the valuable contribution of this review. Policies, practices and research in other countries concerning quality can provide alternative ways of thinking and acting and innovative solutions to the quest for quality in ECCE in Ireland. From the review, synergy themes needing attention in the development of a National Framework for Quality (NFQ) in Ireland emerged, and some of the main implications that will need consideration are outlined below.

9.6.1 Co-ordinated Policy Framework

It is clear that a coherent co-ordinated policy framework is essential for the promotion of quality ECCE. While in some countries this has been achieved through the location of responsibility for policy in ECCE in one government department (the Nordic Countries, New Zealand), other

countries have sought to establish structures which promote a coherent policy framework (Portugal).

9.6.2 Broad Definition of Quality

This review has highlighted the myriad definitions of quality that potentially co-exist at any one point in time and amongst different groups of people, both between and within countries. A flexible definition of quality is needed and any mechanisms designed to support quality improvement in Ireland will need the ability to incorporate different perspectives on quality. Quality will need to be defined in a way that is sufficiently broad to allow for diversity and the adoption of a variety of different approaches. This definition of quality should include process as well as structural aspects.

9.6.3 A Support System which is Advisory and Empowering

It is also clear from the review that the ECCE sector in Ireland will require a support system which is advisory and empowering, which does more than simply inspect. Some countries have adopted an evaluative approach to assessment, this allows for the measurement of concrete structural aspects of quality which are clearly defined and process aspects of quality which are determined in partnership with the service provider. An evaluative approach to measuring quality also allows for the continuous improvement of the service and provides support to providers on this journey.

9.6.4 Engagement of all Stakeholders

It is important that all stakeholders be engaged in any undertaking relating to quality. Much can be accomplished via networks of providers. In Sweden, organised networks of ECCE educators or centres are viewed as a quality system as they promote the exchange of ideas and

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facilitate ongoing professional development amongst ECCE professionals. Research journals regarding ECCE have been established in Norway, Sweden and Portugal. In New Zealand, the sector came together in 1996 to develop a statement on the future development of ECCE and what was needed to ensure quality.

9.6.5 Parental Involvement

The importance of parents as key stakeholders has also been recognised and some countries have legislated for the involvement of parents in childcare facilities. Parental involvement is an important aspect of quality and any developments undertaken in Ireland should be based on a partnership approach with parents.

9.6.6 Adequate Support

It is vital that initiatives seeking to impact on the quality of care and education are adequately supported. For example, the introduction of a curriculum needs a variety of supports if it is to be successful. One can point to New Zealand in this regard, and highlight the wide consultation with the sector that was an integral part of the construction of the curriculum, to the professional development programmes offered regarding the new curriculum, to several research projects that worked to developing frameworks for evaluation and assessment based on the curriculum and to plans to improve process quality through legislating the curriculum. One can also look at Germany where one of the requirements of the two projects focused on developing quality indicators and practical assessment procedures for evaluating the pedagogical work with children aged birth to six is the production of accessible, flexible and relatively low cost printed material available to ECCE institutions for self-evaluation and internal quality development procedures.

9.6.7 Training

International research highlights the importance of training in the provision of services and suggests that there is a general trend towards longer and higher-level basic training for ECCE workers. Both Sweden and New Zealand have all settled on a three-year degree as the main or benchmark training for workers across the ECCE age range. This qualification must be held by all coordinators and persons responsible in New Zealand, while in Norway the *styrere* and *pedagogiske ledere* must be educated pre-school teachers. Portugal has also sought to set standards with the requirement that staff in pre-school institutions hold a pre-school degree. The importance of ongoing professional development has also been acknowledged in several countries. Any approach to improving the quality of childcare and early education in Ireland will need to take the issue of training into account.

9.6.8 Special Needs

In most countries, an integrative approach is adopted for children with special needs with a range of supports such as decreased group sizes and specialised teachers provided. Inclusion within mainstream early education can be beneficial for children with special needs. It is important that the inclusion of children with special needs in mainstream ECCE is adequately supported.

9.7 Conclusion

It is perhaps worth noting in conclusion that a broad range of quality measures, which have the support of parents, practitioners, children, policy makers and society in general represent the best opportunity for quality childcare in Ireland. It is suggested that quality of provision will not be ensured and standards will not be

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raised with a focus on one or more aspects of quality, but that a wide framework of initiatives must be adopted in the search for quality in ECCE in Ireland. The following interaction sheds much light on the process we are about to undertake in Ireland and the necessity of remaining cognisant of the complexity of quality in the Irish context.

Marco Polo describes a bridge.

*"But which is the stone that sustains the bridge?" asks Kubla Khan
"The bridge is not sustained by this stone or that stone" Marco answers
"but by the line of the arch that they create."*

Kubla Khan is silent, reflecting. Then he says *"So why are you telling me about the stones? It is the arch that interests me."*

Polo answers back to him *"There is no arch without stones."* (Calvino, cited in OECD 1998b:13).

We might similarly conclude that there is no single answer to the issue of quality in Ireland, but a series of *"stones"* that if used correctly can raise the quality of ECCE.