

## Quality: A Global Issue? An International Review of Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education 1990–2004

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### Introduction

The core function of the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) is to produce a National Framework for Quality (NFQ) for Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) in Ireland. This comprises three distinct elements of defining, assessing and supporting quality provision in Ireland. To this end, a number of research projects have been conducted as pillars to support the NFQ, including:

- *Talking About Quality*, a national consultation with stakeholders (CECDE, 2004);
- *Perspectives on Childhood* reviews current research on child development and learning (CECDE, Forthcoming A);
- *Insights on Quality: A National Review of Quality in ECCE in Ireland - Policy, Practice and Research 1990-2004* (CECDE, 2005a);
- *Making Connections: A Review of International Policies, Practices and Research Relating to Quality in Early Childhood Care and Education* (CECDE, 2005b).

This paper considers briefly two elements of the International Review, *Making Connections*,<sup>1</sup> in relation to quality in ECCE in six countries, namely; Norway, Sweden, Portugal, Germany, New Zealand and Northern Ireland. A thematic framework for examining the international context has been undertaken. The two themes addressed are:

**Regulations** - The association of regulations with high levels of quality in ECCE settings has been the subject of much research. Much of this research positively links regulations to high quality childcare (Philipsen *et al.*, 1997). Others caution against using structural indicators for the identification of process quality (Lamb, 1998). Mooney *et al.* (2003:5) suggest that "...external evaluation and conforming to standards may be a particularly strong approach..." in contexts where there is little public subsidy for childcare and where structural features are quite poor. Inspection services often ensure compliance with regulations, often combining this with advice and support (Mooney *et al.*, 2003).

**Staff Training and Qualifications** - Research has highlighted the link between professional education and high quality ECCE services (Ball, 1994; Blenkin *et al.*, 1996; Abbott and Pugh, 1998; Feeney and Freeman, 1999; OECD, 2001). As Oberhuemer and Ulich (1997:3) note:

*“Staffing is one of the key quality factors in centre based settings. Decisions made about staffing will be decisions made about the quality of the service.”*

In addition, Mitchell and Cubey (2003) identify three benefits to professional development:

- 1 The enhancement of pedagogy;
- 2 The improvement of children’s learning;
- 3 The building of linkages between ECCE settings and other institutions.

### **Quality in Context**

Concern for the quality in ECCE services has come to the fore internationally in recent times (Williams, 1994; OECD, 2001). Despite this attention, much remains to be learned about quality in relation to how it is defined, assessed and supported. As Moss and Pence (1994:172) state:

*“...quality in early childhood services is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interests, rather than on an objective and universal reality.”*

Due to this complexity and relativity, quality evades easy definition and identification. There is no one single definition of quality and universal standards have been rejected due to the composite nature of cultural values and constructions of childhood. Hence, the definition, assessment and support of quality require an ongoing process of development, incorporating our relative and evolutionary concepts of the term as they transform with cultural, economic and social changes.

### **Rationale for Cross-national Review**

A cross-national review of policy, practice and research was conducted in relation to six countries. The purpose of the review is to distil the general lessons learned in other jurisdictions and to use these in the development of the Nfq in Ireland. The value of such a comparison is manifold as, *inter-alia*, it:

- Provokes critical thinking and provides a clear focus;
- Questions assumptions, practices and discourses otherwise taken for granted;
- Reveals particular understandings of childhood and learning;
- Carries the potential for change;
- Can lead to policy developments and innovation;
- Provides information on international trends in policy (Moss, 2000).

The Esping-Andersen (1990) *Typology of Welfare States* was used as a model for the careful selection of countries, as it outlines the way in which different welfare regimes reflect and reproduce particular ways of thinking and acting in various countries. This typology delineates three different models of Welfare States:

- 1 **Nordic Welfare Regime/Social Democratic** – This model provides high levels of welfare protection against the exigencies of the market. In this case, social reproduction is largely taken over by the State with consequent high degrees of defamilialization<sup>2</sup> (Moss *et al.*, 2003). This leads to high levels of employment, and high levels of taxation. [Sample Countries - **Norway** and **Sweden**].
- 2 **Continental Europe/Conservative Welfare Regime** – This regime is also characterised by a high degree of welfare protection. However, in this instance, social reproduction is largely a matter for the family. Consequently, this entails a high wage/high-skill economy where there is a low level of female participation in the workforce (Engelen, 2003). [Sample Countries - **Portugal** and **Germany**].
- 3 **Anglo-Saxon/Liberal Welfare Regime** – There is a substantial amount of marketisation in this welfare regime. This leads to limited collective welfare protection and a prevalence of private arrangements for social reproduction. The Republic of Ireland could be characterised as fitting into this particular welfare regime. [Sample Countries - **New Zealand** and **Northern Ireland**].

A brief outline of the structure and provision of ECCE precedes the thematic review for each country in order to contextualise the thematic analysis.

### **Norway**

ECCE services are viewed as part of family policy in Norway (Alvestad and Samuelsson, 1999) and are considered an important aspect of enhancing child development in collaboration with the home (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2004). One of the primary aims of ECCE is to make it possible for parents to work and to contribute to equality for men and women (OECD, 1998a). The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs is responsible for policymaking and administration in ECCE, yet despite this national structure, the implementation and delivery of policy and services in preschool settings rests with Local Authorities. At present, Norway is moving towards universal provision of ECCE services (Statistics Norway, 2003).

### **Regulations**

The regulatory system in Norway is largely decentralised and has been devolved to local authorities and municipalities. However, the legislative framework for such regulations is

set at national level, i.e., the *Barnhager Act* (1995). Despite such national policy in Norway, considerable discretion is afforded to individual municipalities, local authorities and ECCE settings regarding all aspects, including structural features such as staff-child ratios, based on the context and the needs of the children attending (OECD, 1999b). In addition to the inspection of preschools by the local authority, inherent in the *Framework Plan*<sup>3</sup> for all ECCE settings is provision for self-evaluation through observation, self-reflection and documentation (OECD, 1999b).

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

Special emphasis is placed on the training and qualifications of ECCE staff in the achievement of quality in Norway (Ministry of Children and Family Affairs, 2004). The head teacher and the preschool teacher must have tertiary level training, while there are no formal requirements for preschool assistants (OECD, 1998a). Kosiander and Reigstad (2002) assert that in Norway, approximately one-third of the ECCE workforce are trained pedagogues. Provision for professional development is also provided by the State in Norway.

### **Sweden**

The ECCE system in Sweden was decentralised in 1998 from the Ministry of Education and Science to the municipalities, following a long period of strict regulation and centralised control. Such regulation resulted in the achievement of high quality in settings and a societal expectation for quality services (Mooney *et al.*, 2003). The primary aims of ECCE services include supporting children's development and enabling parents to reconcile work and family life (OECD, 2001). Policymaking is still instituted nationally while such policies are implemented at a local level by the municipalities (OECD, 1999a; Kamerman, 2000). Sweden is moving towards universal provision in ECCE services at present (Skolverket, 2000).

### ***Regulations***

The ECCE system has been completely decentralised in Sweden since 1996 following a period of centralised and strict regulations (Lohmander, 2002). This led to a situation whereby quality services were achieved, and societal expectations of quality services remain high. Standards and regulations are implemented at local level by the municipalities, covering aspects such as group size, premises and qualifications of ECCE personnel (OECD, 1999a). The inspection system in Sweden has been replaced with a network of Advisors, who place a heavy emphasis on the support and development of services. The private sector in Sweden is small and is unregulated.

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

The State also insists on high levels of training and the provision of good working

conditions for ECCE personnel in Sweden (Cameron *et al.*, 2003). At present, Sweden is moving towards a common training framework for all working in ECCE settings, in the hope that:

*“...provision of a common training framework should facilitate the building of linkages across the different phases of lifelong learning.”* (OECD, 2001:99)

Professional development is provided by the municipalities in a wide variety of domains (Oberhuemer and Ulich, 1997).

### **Portugal**

Portugal displays a strong and ideological commitment to the family, but in practice, family and childcare policies occupy a low profile in national terms. Provision can be best described in terms of a rudimentary welfare State, compensated by traditional welfare guarantees stemming from strong families and informal support networks (Wall *et al.*, 2001). In Portugal, care and education are treated as two distinct systems, catered for by the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Labour and Solidarity respectively (OECD, 2001). Preschool education is seen as catering for children aged 3-6, while ECCE provision for children aged birth to three is not high on the political agenda (Wall, 2000). Policy for ECCE services is defined, planned, coordinated, inspected and evaluated at national level, but also allows a great amount of decentralisation in terms of implementation (OECD, 2000a).

### ***Regulations***

Objectives for quality and responsibility for inspection and supervision are outlined by central government in Portugal. The Framework Law for Preschool Education controls the organisational, pedagogic and technical aspects of ECCE (OECD, 1998b). This includes the defining of rules for preschools, the provision of syllabi, guidelines and regulations in relation to training and qualifications (Vasconcelos, 1998). Inspection is the main vehicle of supervision, inherent in which are diagnostic and improvement procedures for quality.

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

All preschool teachers are trained and licensed, while a lower qualification is accepted in not-for-profit settings in Portugal (OECD, 2000a). Those who have qualified to degree level receive the same salary as teachers in primary schools. In addition, there are a wide variety of State-funded professional development courses available regionally in Portugal (Vasconcelos, 2002).

### **Germany**

The reunification of Germany in 1990 led to the integration of two separate systems of care and education. To date, there are no binding guidelines for the country and there is

a separation of care (ages birth to three) and education services (ages 3-6) (Pettinger, 1993). The primary aim is to support parents in rearing children and to develop responsible and socially competent children. Overall responsibility for ECCE services rests with central government as part of the social welfare portfolio (Griebel and Niesel, 1999). Each State is given the autonomy to implement State guidelines and legislation, thus affording a high degree of autonomy, resulting in a diversity of legislative and administrative structures.

### ***Regulations***

The regulation of ECCE services in Germany is at State level, where there is a strong focus by State authorities on structural features such as adult-child ratios, group size and the quality of premises (Kreyenfeld *et al.*, 2000). In 2000, a *National Quality Initiative* was introduced to design quality standards for ECCE settings, including aspects of assessing and supporting quality within the sector (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, 2000). The private sector is unregulated in Germany as are family day care providers who care for four or less children (including their own).

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

There is a wide diversity in training courses available, but at present, there is no national framework or guidelines in relation to training and qualifications. There are a number of training courses and avenues for personnel to enter the ECCE sector, with some courses lasting up to three years (Oberhuemer and Ulich, 1997).

### ***New Zealand***

In New Zealand, the quality of ECCE services is a major concern. Policymaking is undertaken at a national level under the Ministry of Education (Everiss and Dalli, 2003). The provision of services is largely through the private and community sector (Meade and Podmore, 2002; Mitchell, 2002). Fears have been expressed in New Zealand that the market approach is not always the best way to regulate quality, for example, through parental choice (Smith and Farquar, 1994). The ECCE sector is strong and unified in New Zealand and in 2002 articulated its recommendations and plan for its development, *Pathways to the Future* (Ministry of Education, 2002).

### ***Regulations***

There is one set of national regulations in New Zealand for the whole sector outlining minimum standards for group size, adult-child ratios, curriculum, organisation and management (Everiss and Dalli, 2003). The Educational Review Office monitors quality through a process of external review and evaluation, fulfilling the dual role of accountability and educational improvement (Educational Review Office, 2002a). Until recently, these have been implemented at local level through the drafting of a Charter

between the individual setting and the government (Ministry of Education, 2003). This charter included the aims, philosophies, values, and characteristics of the setting (Farquhar, 1991). In recent times, the Charter system has been replaced by Desirable Objectives and Practices (DOPs), which are less stringent and less prescriptive on settings than the Charter system. In addition, the government funds the *Quality Journey* to develop quality improvement systems, while the New Zealand Childcare Organisation has also developed an accreditation system for the sector, the *Quality Register*.

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

There are limited training opportunities available in New Zealand and thus there are low levels of training within the sector. Recent initiatives have introduced the minimum qualification of a tertiary Diploma for working in an ECCE setting (Podmore *et al.*, 2000). Professional development courses are provided by the State. The low levels and opportunities for training in New Zealand has caused concerns about the sector's ability to implement the ambitious *Te Whāriki* curriculum in operation in ECCE settings there (Cullen, 1996; Education Review Office, 1998).

### **Northern Ireland**

ECCE in Northern Ireland is seen as a support to families and children, to promote the well being of the child, to support parents in work-life balance and the ability to avail of equal opportunities (Department of Health and Social Services, 1999). There is a split between the administration of the education and care of young children, treated respectively by the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Social Services (OECD, 2000b). At present, services for children aged three months to three years are largely private and voluntary in nature (Candappa *et al.*, 2003). The Preschool Expansion Programme is in the process of expanding services for all three year olds towards universal provision (Department of Education Northern Ireland, 2002), with compulsory education beginning when the child is four years of age.

### ***Regulations***

Responsibility for regulation in Northern Ireland is centralised within the Education and Training Inspectorate, which reports on all ECCE settings. There are minimum requirements in relation to structural issues. Following an informal and formal visit, a report is published on each individual setting. Settings then develop Action Plans to address issues raised in the report. In addition, there are a wide variety of accreditation programmes in operation in Northern Ireland and, at present, there is movement towards formulating a common accreditation scheme.

### ***Staff Training and Qualifications***

There are low levels of personnel trained in the ECCE sector in Northern Ireland. In

addition, there are different regulations for the care and education sector, reflecting the traditional divide in services there (Northern Area Partnership, 2002). In the formal education sector, teachers have a four-year degree while teachers working in the Preschool Expansion Programme are also required to be trained. Outside the formal school sector, there are no standardised qualification requirements at preschool level. However, there is a wide variety of courses available and at present, a *National Climbing Frame* for qualifications is being developed (Department of Health and Social Services, 1999).

### Conclusion

This paper has traced the context of quality in ECCE in six countries. It is evident that there is great diversity in the organisation and delivery of ECCE services in each jurisdiction. In relation to regulations, a number of models are presented, ranging from strict centralised control to complete deregulation of authority to local and regional structures. A number of non-regulatory quality improvement programmes are also in evidence in a number of countries to enhance the quality of provision. There is a multiplicity of requirements in relation to the training and qualifications of personnel working within ECCE settings, while many initiatives are underway to enhance the opportunities available for the attainment of education and training. A special emphasis is also placed on ongoing professional development for practitioners. There are many positive lessons to be learned from the review, but reassuringly, it reinforces much of our current policy and indicates that provision here is congruent with international models of best practice.

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**Notes:**

- 1 The full text of the International Review is available at [www.cecde.ie](http://www.cecde.ie). The CECDE wishes to acknowledge the work of the Centre for Social and Educational Research, Dublin Institute of Technology, from whom the CECDE commissioned the literature review of the cross-national study.
- 2 Defamilialization is explained as the degree to which households' welfare and caring responsibilities are relaxed - either via welfare State provision or via market provision. (Esping-Andersen, 1999:51)
- 3 The *Framework Plan* is a national curriculum for all preschool settings in Norway.