



Quality of Childcare and Pre-Primary Education: How do we measure it?

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Early childhood development is a driving force for sustainable development due to its multiplier effects not only on children but also on the community and society at large (Britto, Yoshikawa and Boller, 2011). Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Target 4.2 emphasizes the importance of access to high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) as a means of achieving equity and transforming lives through education. At the heart of this ambition is a key message: access to ECEC alone is insufficient for achieving positive child outcomes – it must also be of high quality. As a result, meeting target 4.2 means developing methods to accurately measure and monitor quality standards in ECEC. This Brief aims to summarize the key points of ongoing debate on this issue, and outline some of the challenges faced by high-income countries.

The concept of ECEC quality is dynamic and complex and judgements depend on “beliefs, values, a country’s (or region’s) socio-economic context, and the needs of the community of users” (Tagumna et al., 2012:13). While a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution to measuring quality and monitoring standards is unlikely to be found, efforts have been made to come to a general consensus on the key features of quality. The European Union (2014) has identified three interacting and interdependent measures that contribute to ECEC quality: the structure of ECEC provision; the quality of processes used in ECEC and the outcomes from ECEC. Each of these elements needs to be considered independently and collectively when measuring ECEC quality.

Historically, measures of ECEC quality have focused on the system design and organization (structure) of services, including accreditation, staff-child ratios, and health and safety regulations. However, research consistently shows that, for positive child development outcomes, the pedagogical practice within ECEC settings (process), including interactions and relationships, the role of play, the integration of care and

education, and child engagement are crucial to establishing and sustaining the building blocks of later social, academic and labour market outcomes (Laevers, 2005; Sylva et al., 2006; Heckman and Kautz, 2012; Algan et al., 2014; European Commission, 2014). Practical implementation of this monitoring agenda is not an easy task as it inevitably poses a number of questions, examined below.

HOW CAN ECEC QUALITY BE MONITORED IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS?

ECEC services in high-income countries vary widely in terms of decentralization, curriculum and funding structure. Heterogeneity in provision is a challenge for the replication of successful practices and programmes designed to promote quality within and between countries.

For example, in Canada, a decentralized federation, the provinces and territories have primary responsibility for ECEC design, delivery of provision and funding. Historically, the federal role in ECEC has been minimal, limited to non-earmarked fiscal transfers and demand-side transfers to families, and there have been no overarching policy, legislative framework, standards or access requirements. Access is limited and quality is uneven across Canada (Friendly, 2016). Moreover, data have been insufficient to allow adequate monitoring of policy and programmes in ECEC. But the federal government has recently re-entered the ECEC field, in order to collaborate with provinces and territories on their policy and provision with the aim of establishing a national policy, funding and data strategy (Canada News Wire, 2017).

While decentralization of ECEC services could provide an opportunity for innovation, without a federal role there is considerable variability in human and material resources, infrastructure, governance, teaching practices, legislative requirements, data/research and other ingredients of quality.

In this context, a challenge in monitoring quality is to ensure that nation-wide data is coherent, consistent and comprehensive in order to allow disaggregation at the child and family level and facilitate analysis of actual system usage and outcomes among different sub-groups of children (Cleveland et al. 2003).

HOW TO RECOGNISE THE COMPLEXITY OF INTERPLAY BETWEEN HOME ENVIRONMENT AND FORMAL ECEC?

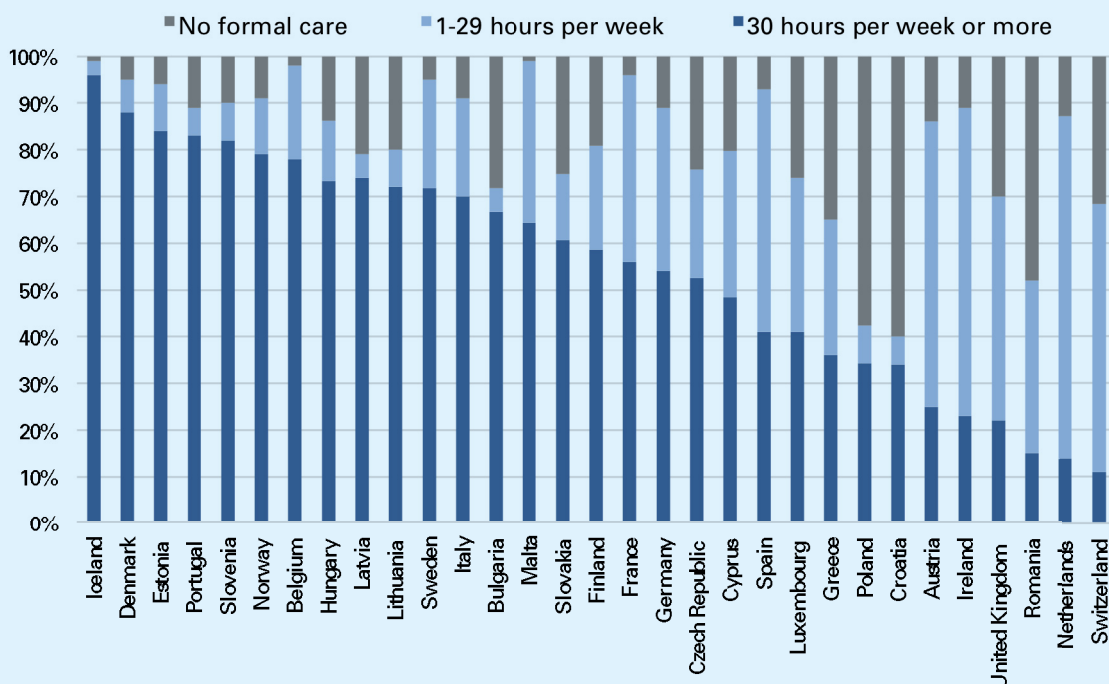
Quality ECEC settings are responsive to the dynamic nature of children’s lives. Family– a child’s most immediate environment – is not static in composition, economic

circumstances, location or social interactions. This changing environment and its interaction with the formal setting influence a child’s engagement and learning. Quality early childhood education settings are built through partnership, across family, parents and ECEC educators. They establish effective communication channels and timely support to and from the child’s home learning environment (Melhuish et al., 2008) so that both settings contribute to positive child outcomes. Measuring the interplay between ECEC settings and family environment, particularly the nature and type of communication, is an aspect of process quality that requires a shift of focus from normative child development measures towards more dynamic aspects. This is likely to be challenging (Sylva et al., 2006).

FINDING THE RIGHT BALANCE

Family environment plays a vital role in preparing children for school. Evidence shows that families chose a combination of informal and formal care that best suits their circumstances and needs. There is a substantial variation among EU countries in the duration of children’s participation in formal ECEC as well as the extent of informal (family) care between ages 3 and the start of formal schooling (Figure1). In Denmark, Estonia, Iceland, Portugal and Slovenia over 80 per cent of children are engaged in organized formal learning and care for 30 hours or more per week. Conversely, only about 11 per cent of children in Switzerland, 14 per cent in the Netherlands, and 15 per cent in Romania participate in structured formal programmes of the same duration and at the same age. But the comparison is more nuanced given the actual balance between different types of care within the countries. For example, the majority of children (74 per cent) in the Netherlands are engaged in part time provision (1-29 hours per week) while in Poland and Croatia the main choices seem to be between full-time and informal care (about 57 per cent of children in Poland and 60 per cent in Croatia of corresponding age do not participate in formal ECEC provision). The reasons for low participation in formal care could be in barriers to access but also in expressed preferences. Parents and carers might chose to use their own time resources, extended family or informal network to meet childcare demands.

Figure 1. Proportion of children between the age of 3 and compulsory school age engaged in pre-primary learning by duration of actual participation



Source: Eurostat 2014

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE 'READY FOR PRIMARY EDUCATION' OR 'DEVELOPMENTALLY ON TRACK'?

Quality ECEC settings foster child development and recognize children as active learners and capable explorers of their environment. The concept of 'school readiness' however can be problematic as it locates the responsibility for readiness within the child, emphasizing the development of 'basic skills' and literacy outcomes. More recent scholarship highlights the holistic nature of transition to school and speaks of the need for ready families, ready schools and ready children (UNICEF, 2012). The '*developmentally on track*' approach supports a pedagogy that encourages children to learn through play – vital to developing soft skills such as self-regulation and attentiveness, the foundations for future learning. Recognizing play as an integral part of a child's learning highlights the need to take account of the relational and interactive environment when measuring ECEC quality.

Many different instruments have been developed for measuring elements of structural quality. While the situation is less well developed in relation to measuring process and pedagogical quality, there have been some recent developments of note (OECD, 2013). Instruments include rating scales, surveys and observations. Focusing on children, Laevers (2005, 2015) has developed two observation scales, measuring young children's level of well-being and involvement, the Leuven Scales. The rationale underlying the focus on these two process dimensions is that high levels of well-being and involvement lead in the end to high levels of child development and deep-level learning. More recently Siraj-Blatchford, Kingston and Melhuish (2015) have designed a measure focusing on the quality of childcare practice in settings for children aged 2-5 years. The instrument, the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) Scale, consists of two domains relevant for child development, each consisting of a number of sub-scales:

1. *Social and emotional development*: a) building trust, confidence and independence and b) social and emotional well-being;
2. *Cognitive development*: a) supporting and extending language and communication; b) supporting learning and critical thinking; c) assessing learning and language.

Along with other tools, these developments offer an opportunity for real improvement in the measurement of process quality.

CONCLUSION

Quality of ECEC is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon. One cannot underestimate the challenges in capturing or measuring this complexity. This Brief argues that a step towards a more holistic monitoring of ECEC would be to develop a coherent national strategy that recognizes diversity while addressing disparities; to respond to the needs of both child and family through strong partnerships with parents and ECE practitioners; and to apply measurement tools that capture a child's engagement rather than test readiness. Moreover, each country can ensure the question of quality is high on the policy agenda by collecting data at child level and identifying risks and barriers to positive child development. Such efforts will link improvements in the quality of ECEC to policy actions and enhance equity in access.

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