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Researching Quality in Irish Early Education

Karen Mahony & Nóirín Hayes

Introduction

Interest in quality early childhood care and education (ECCE) has become evident, both nationally and internationally, in recent years. Within the Irish context developments within ECCE have predominantly related to policy and advocacy, with such becoming increasingly more apparent in the latter half of the 1990s. However, research in the area of early childhood care and education and in particular research pertaining to quality, has not been as evident (Walsh, 2003). As a nation, we are currently obliged to draw on international studies relative to quality early childhood care and education to support and advocate for high standards. The examination of such international literature outlines that benefits or outcomes associated with the provision of good quality early childhood care and education (both immediate in nature, but also in the longer term) include academic, social and economic outcomes.

The assessment of quality standards places an ever-increasing emphasis on the evaluation of both static and dynamic elements of a setting, but also demands the assessment of child outcomes to justify the review. However, determining the indicators of quality (be they dynamic or static in character) is highly dependent on the social norms and values of the society under examination. Research suggests that the classification of indicators of good quality are strongly influenced by the perspectives of all those persons with an interest in early childhood care and education (Moss and Pence, 1994), therefore an Irish definition of quality is dependent on the voice of those with a stake in the Irish early childhood care and education sector.

In 2004, the Centre for Social and Educational Research was commissioned by the Centre for Early Childhood Care and Education to conduct research relating to early childhood care and education, specifically research accessing the multiple perspectives of Irish ECCE stakeholders. The following paper provides an overview of such a project, preceded by a chronological examination of Irish policy and advocacy developments in the area over the past decade. An overview of emergent international research outlining the benefits of good quality

provision is examined, with a brief discussion on defining early childhood care and education, followed finally by an analysis of the elements outlined internationally as determinants of quality early childhood care and education.

Irish Policy and Advocacy Context

Although developments relating to early childhood care and education in the Irish context were more evident in the latter half, than the earlier half, of the 1990s and principally related to policy and advocacy the initial piece of legislation relating directly to the sector emerged in 1991. The Child Care Act, 1991 for the first time, provided for the regulation and inspection of early childhood care and education settings in Ireland. It placed responsibility on the regional health boards (currently health service executive) for the inspection of health and safety standards of ECCE settings within their geographical domain. However, the legislation was limited and failed to include those services taking care of less than three children *i.e.* childminders. In 1996, the Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations were enacted and regulation commenced. The regulation defined the specific health, safety and welfare regulations relating to birth to six year olds attending ECCE settings. It defined acceptable standards relating to ventilation, nutrition adult/child ratios, provisions for sleeping and space as well as other structural aspects. However, neither the 1996 regulations nor the 1991 Child Care Act acknowledged the dynamic aspects of ECCE settings, nor did they focus on staff training or child outcomes. The limitations of both the Child Care Act and the Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations are discussed in '*A Guide to Quality Practice in Preschool Services*' (Western Health Board, 2000) which addresses child outcomes, and both the dynamic and static aspects of quality in the early childhood care and education sector.

The latter half of the 1990s witnessed an upsurge in literature relative to early childhood care and education. Firstly, ratification of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* by the Irish Government in 1992 placed an obligation on the state to ensure Irish children were afforded basic rights and that their needs were appropriately considered. Ratification also placed a greater responsibility on the government to support the development of early childhood care and education, making it available to all children and families requiring it. Article 18.2 of the convention states that '*State Parties shall render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and shall ensure the development of institutions,*

facilities and services for the care of children' (United Nations, 1989:Article 18.2). In 1996 the EU Childcare Network published a ten-year programme towards enhancing the quality of early years services. The publication was titled '*Quality Targets in Services for Young Children*' and stated that good quality early childhood care and education programmes can best be achieved when early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings are supported within a national framework. In Ireland, two particular publications led the way towards the development of such a framework in 1999, notably the *National Childcare Strategy* in 1999 (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999) and '*Ready to Learn: White Paper on Early Childhood Care and Education*' (Department of Education and Science, 1999). Among other things the White paper recommends the establishment of an Early Education Agency and to this end the Department of Education and Science has funded the Dublin Institute of Technology and St. Patrick's College of Education to establish and develop the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE). The White Paper also recommended the development of a National Quality Framework for Early Education and appropriate curriculum guidelines for the sector, for which the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) currently hold responsibility. It also called for a national outline of suitable qualifications and training for staff, with a suitable method of inspection being introduced.

Developments in the subsequent decade far advanced those of the previous, initially the '*National Children's Strategy: Our Children – Their Lives*' (Department of Health and Children, 2000) was launched in 2000. The strategy provided a wider national framework for working both for and with children. It is guided by the principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child aspiring to '*... enhance the status and further improve the quality of life of Ireland's children*' (Department of Health and Children, 2000:6). Although the strategy is not specific to early childhood it does recognise the importance of the early years and the need to develop and enhance ECCE services, particularly for children who may be disadvantaged or have special needs. In 2002, the publication of '*Quality Childcare and Lifelong Learning: Model Framework for Education, Training and Professional Development for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector*' (Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform, 2002) provided guidance on the professional development of people working in ECCE, whilst the '*OECD Thematic Review of Early Childhood*

Education and Care in Ireland' (Department of Education and Science, 2004) made recommendations in relation to training, a national framework and accreditation system in early childhood care and education in Ireland. More recently the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment launched '*Towards a Framework for Early Learning*' (NCCA, 2004), which outlined the importance of the development of a national curriculum framework for ECCE. It is anticipated that the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment's forthcoming 'Final Consultation Report' will outline the need to support both practitioners and parents in their roles and that the National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) will publish a report supporting a strategy for the future including the coordination of policy at both national and local levels and the provision of committed resources provided on a regular basis.

Benefits and Outcomes of Quality Provision

The benefits of providing high quality early childhood care and education are both immediate and long-term in nature (Field, 1991; Kelleghan, 1977; O'Flaherty, 1995; Schweinhart, 2004). Immediate-term benefits such as high self-esteem, emotional stability and greater assertiveness have been noted as a result of research carried out with children attending full-time day-care (Field, 1991). In 1993 Kelleghan and Greaney reported some evidence of a connection between child attendance in early education settings and gains in IQ and academic attainment for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with special needs. Developed reasoning and problem-solving skills were also identified amongst such children.

In relation to longer-term benefits the '*High/Scope Perry Preschool Study*' (Schweinhart, 2004) found the majority of participants in its study (average age forty) displayed positive social and emotional development, increased economic performance and reduced perpetration of crime, when compared with their peers who had not attended an early education setting. Other studies supporting such findings include Laevers 'International Study on Experiential Education', 2003; the US Head Start Programme (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997) and Ramey and Campbell's Carolina Abecedarian Project (1991).

A unique feature of all findings outlined above, be they immediate- or long-term in nature, is their dependence on the presence of high quality. Hence, the benefits of providing quality early education have not alone immediate-

and medium-term effects, but indeed durable and long-lasting effects on children aged birth to six.

Defining Quality

The importance of good quality in terms of early education services is acknowledged and well documented. Equally, poor quality settings have been found to have negative effects on children (Belsky, 1986; Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, 1999; Sims, Guilfoyle and Parry, 2005; Stipek *et al*, 1995; Sylva and Wilshire, 1993). However, no single definition of what constitutes 'quality' in early childhood care and education provision exists and the idea of a universally accepted standard of quality has been rejected in favour of a more relativist, values based approach which recognises that quality changes over time and contexts: '*... quality in early childhood services is a constructed concept, subjective in nature and based on values, beliefs and interests, rather than on objective and universal reality*' (Moss, 1994:4). Moss and Pence (1994) and Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) suggest that it is much more accurate to speak about quality perspectives than a universal standard of quality *i.e.* different people consider different elements as contributors of quality. Also, perceptions of what constitutes quality in early education can vary immensely, and depends greatly on the cultural values of a particular society. Therefore, the concept of quality needs to be contextualised spatially and temporally to recognise cultural and other forms of diversity, as well as regularly recognising shifts in culture and diversity.

Theorists have acknowledged that a multitude of perspectives exist in any one society. In 1990, Farquhar identified that such perspectives may overlap somewhat, but may also exert significantly different emphases. Such perspectives can include the child development perspective, the government or regulatory perspective, the social services perspective, the parental perspective, the child's perspective, the social policy perspective, the staff perspectives and finally the cultural perspective (Katz, 1992).

Unfortunately, because of the diverse nature of its stakeholders the diversity of perspectives may lead to conflict and disagreement amongst and between them. Most often the perspectives of those holding the greatest level of power take precedence over the perspectives and values of other stakeholders, which creates a process based on exclusion:

'... the power of different stakeholders often determines the influence they have in the process: power can come from various sources, including economic resources, political or administrative position and professional status and expertise. Some stakeholders may be totally excluded, or if included, they may have little influence ...' (Moss, 1994:4). To date the trend has predominantly presented prominence to a narrower range of experts who control the process of definition and evaluation on the basis of technical expertise.

Therefore, to attempt to understand quality within any particular geographical context, multiple perspectives must be consulted. The development of a framework which considers the diverse perspectives of its stakeholders is a challenge, but one which must be considered. The 'National Framework for Quality' being developed by the CECDE must consider all those perspectives, whilst striking a balance of the common objectives of those perspectives.

Determinants of Quality

The quality of early education settings varies enormously nationally, and is determined by a combination of static, quantifiable and dynamic, less-quantifiable factors. The static elements include the physical and structural characteristics such as the building and surroundings, the equipment available. The dynamic factors on the other hand are far more difficult to define and measure, and include the day-to-day experiences of the children, relationships and communication in the setting (Hayes, 2004:59). The 1996 Child Care (Pre-school) Regulations (Department of Health and Children, 1996) allow for the primary assessment of settings relative to health and safety elements *i.e.* the static elements outlined above. More recently publications such as *'A Guide to Quality Practice in Preschool Services'* (Western Health Board, 2000) are focusing on both the dynamic and static aspects of quality, as well as the child outcomes. The current review of the regulations will allow for more careful attention to both static and process variables hence improving, supporting and regulating quality early education and care.

In Search of Quality: Multiple Perspectives

The *'Multiple Perspectives'* study aims to gain a greater understanding of quality in the Irish context, in particular to access multiple perspectives on the meaning of quality within a variety of early childhood care and education settings in Ireland. It focuses primarily on defining and understanding quality in the early

childhood care and education sector across a range of stakeholders including policy makers, early childhood care and education staff and teachers, parents and children.

While there has been extensive debate in the early childhood care and education sector regarding what constitutes quality, the voices of parents and children have been less evident than those of researchers and persons working in the early childhood care and education sector. This is mainly attributable to the power dynamics which are present in the sector, presenting distinction to the experts who control the process of definition and evaluation on the basis of technical expertise (Balageur, Mestres and Penn, 1992; Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999).

The National Children's Strategy, reflecting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), states that children and young people should be given *'... a voice in matters which affect them and views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity'* (Department of Health and Children, 2000:30). To date only a small body of research has been completed which bestows a voice to children as valued stakeholders in determining quality in the provision of early childhood care and education (Clarke, McQuail, and Moss, 2003; Hennessy, 2001; Mooney and Blackburn, 2003; Stephen, 2003). The inclusion and empowerment of children in defining and evaluating quality assists in balancing power relations amongst all stakeholders in the process of defining quality early education whilst also providing a subjective, experienced outlook of early education settings: *'... the actual or true predictor of a program's effects is the quality of life experienced by each participating child on a day to day basis'* (Katz, 1993:5).

The current study aspires to not only consult those deemed experts in the field of early childhood care and education *e.g.* the Departments of Education and Science, Health and Children, and Justice Equality and Law Reform, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment and the National Children's Office, but also professionals in a supportive role *e.g.* Pre-school Inspectors, County Childcare Committees and representatives of the National Voluntary Organisations. However, a particularly unique aspect of the study for Ireland is the fact that the research team also aspire to consult service providers, parents and children. Therefore, it is anticipated that the study in question will balance

the scales of power relating to early childhood care and education, by uniquely including the views of all the relevant stakeholders.

The Sample

The project seeks to gather data from a variety of settings¹ covering both sessional and full-day care provision, across the age-range of 0-6 years. Four Border-Midland Counties (Donegal, Leitrim, Roscommon and Galway) and four South & East Counties (Clare, Limerick, Carlow and Meath) have been selected as the geographical districts which allows for a national distribution of settings. The research team aims to consult with a total of thirty settings, consulting with one staff member and two families within each setting (one/both parents/guardians and one child from each family). To date twenty-two settings have resolved to participate (three preschools, three playgroups, four nurseries, six crèches, one naíonra, one infant class, four childminders).

The current study will assess both the observable and perceived aspects of quality early childhood care and education. The observable aspects will be examined using standardised observation scales and external research assessments, and the perceived aspects will be addressed through individual interview and focus groups with the adults in the sample. The techniques developed for use with adults are not appropriate for children, particularly given the age-span involved. Therefore, access to the views of children will be gained through a combination of child-research techniques drawing on existing research (Clarke, McQuail and Moss, 2003; Clarke and Moss, 2001; Greene and Hogan, 2005; Kernan, 2005; Measelle, Ablow, Cowan and Cowan, 1998; Mooney and Blackburn, 2003; Stephen, 2003).

Observable Quality

One of the best known observational tools for the measurement of quality is the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) (Harms and Clifford, 1980) revised in 1998 (Harms and Clifford, 1998). The revised edition (ECERS-R) will be used in this study. The ECERS-R looks at forty-three items over seven dimensions, notably: personal care routines, space and furnishings, language reasoning, activities, programme structure, interaction, and parents and staff. Scoring is on a 7-point scale which spans from excellent (7) to inadequate (1).

However, the ECERS-R is designed to focus on the childcare environment and is not designed to assess the high quality interactions and experiences for the child *i.e.* the dynamic elements of early childhood care and education settings. To address this aspect of quality the research team have adjusted the observation tool used in the IEA Preprimary Project (Hayes, O'Flaherty and Kernan, 1997), to allow researchers observe and record the interactive environment experienced by the child. This tool will assess the adult's Management of Time (MOT), Adult Behaviour (AB) and Child Activity (CA). It will categorise the quality of the relationship in broad terms *e.g.* warmth and indifference, but will also focus on the units of interaction *i.e.* who initiated the interaction; child/adult, how did the child respond etc. (Dunn, 2005). Used together, the ECERS-(R) and the adjusted IEA Preprimary tools will provide a rich overview of both the static and the interactive environment experienced by the child at any given time.

Perceived Quality

In order to assess stakeholder perception's of quality early childhood care and education, face-to-face interviews will be held with experts in the field *i.e.* representatives from the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the National Children's Office; staff members of the relevant early childhood care and education settings (which have been identified through the sample); and parents/guardians of the children (each setting has randomly selected two interested families to participate in the study). The face-to-face interviews will take place throughout the months of May and June 2005.

Focus groups will also be carried out with a broader sample of practitioners, representatives of the County Childcare Committees, groups of Pre-school Inspectors, and representatives of the National Voluntary Childcare Organisations. The focus groups will be informed by the results of the semi-structured interviews and the literature review.

To access children's perspectives on the meaning of quality within a variety of early childhood care and education settings, the research team will adopt a combination of consultation tools. As the children are very young (0-6 years) it will be necessary to move away from the written word, and to concentrate on the spoken word, visual methods and sensory methods. It will also be necessary

that the field researchers are flexible in their approach to researching the children's perspectives. Methods such as the use of cameras, photographs, puppets, role-plays, and arts and crafts as proven methods of consulting young children (Clarke, McQuail and Moss, 2003; Mooney and Blackburn, 2003; Stephen, 2003) will be used with the more mature children. An observational approach which looks at behaviour as a source of voice on quality, and the observation of play as a language of childhood (the concept of 'embodiment' *i.e.* the body as the voice of the child) will be developed for the younger children (Laevers, 1998).

Ethical Considerations

Additional to the general principles of ethical research, particular issues had to be considered by the research team prior to involving children in the research. These include the use of selection procedures, which must be as inclusive and equitable as possible. Informed consent was sought from the parents and guardians of children, but also, where appropriate, from the children themselves (particularly children aged 3+). Involvement in the research must be completely voluntary on the child's behalf, and he/she must be made aware that they are free to withdraw should they wish to do so. Every effort will be made to ensure that the purpose and nature of the research are as clear and transparent as possible, as will the extent of confidentiality and anonymity. Mechanisms for feedback to the participants will be outlined prior to participation, and will be followed through.

Time-scale

The project began in November 2004 and will run through to September 2005. To date the research team have carried out an extensive literature review, which will be continuous for the duration of the project; carried out their sampling procedures and contacted the participants, refined the research instruments, trained the field researchers, and are presently piloting the research instruments. The fieldwork is due to commence early May 2005, and will take place over a two-month period.

Project Outputs

The project will yield empirical data on the multiple perspectives of quality held by a variety of interested parties ranging from those at a national policy level through to the children attending varied early educational settings in

Ireland. In addition, the project will use a variety of methodologies to gather data and will pioneer methods for listening directly to very young children.

Upon conclusion of the project we will have a clearer view of how quality is viewed in Ireland. This greater understanding will allow for a more careful consideration of how best to support quality for young children and their families. The study hopes to identify common understandings of quality, while highlighting different focuses from different groups. The findings from this research will inform the development, implementation and support of the National Quality Framework being developed by the Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education. They will also guide policy and practice informing future development of training, quality enhancement and pedagogical practice and impact positively on the education and development of children in this age-range.

¹ Including pre-schools, playgroups, early start classrooms, day-nurseries, crèches, naóinraí, infant classes and childminders.

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