

Early Childhood Education and Care: Quality matters

Research Briefing

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National Assembly for Wales
Senedd Research

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Paper Overview:

This briefing is the second in a series providing a quick guide to early childhood education and care (ECEC). In the context of international evidence, it sets out to examine what quality ECEC looks like, how quality ECEC needs to be organised, and how this is reflected against current policy, provision and practice in Wales.

The briefing has been written by Dr David Dallimore from the School of Health Sciences at Bangor University under Senedd Research's **Academic Fellowship Scheme** to support Assembly Members in their scrutiny of the provision of ECEC.

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Introduction

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is the term widely used to describe any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age.

Almost all the research done internationally in the past couple of decades has highlighted the critical role of the quality of ECEC in promoting the cognitive, physical and socio-emotional development of children especially those from disadvantaged families.

In this briefing, we review evidence to discuss the questions of quality, examining what the research tells us about how quality is conceived; the structures needed to support quality; the processes needed to deliver quality; the policy environment in which quality ECEC flourishes; and how all this relates to the current situation in Wales.

While links to particular research studies are embedded in the text, a short recommended reading list is also included at the end of the paper.

What do we mean by Quality?

Most developed countries now recognise that high quality ECEC provision produces high quality outcomes - particularly for disadvantaged children. But while policy documents commonly cite 'quality' as being important, it is rarely if ever defined.

This lack of definition suggests that there is already an accepted formula for successful ECEC - but this is not the case. As discussed in the first **Briefing paper** in this series, the values and beliefs held about childhood in different countries make quality in ECEC a relative concept that will look different according to the context.

“Defining quality should be a dynamic, continuous and democratic process. A balance needs to be found between defining certain common objectives, applying them to all services, and supporting diversity between individual services.” **European Commission, 2014**

A further complication is that quality looks different depending on your perspective. A diverse group of stakeholders in ECEC includes parents, practitioners, politicians, commissioners and children themselves. All have distinct views on how they perceive and experience quality. To account for this, **the literature** suggests that a true definition of quality can only come from shared understanding between all these interested parties.

There are nevertheless components of quality that are commonly considered in studies comparing different approaches to ECEC. Most of these studies take a 'whole-system' approach suggesting that every aspect of ECEC is examined, from the quality of interactions between children and adults to the policy systems that set out how provision is organised.

Quality Provision

Even though there is no internationally agreed concept of ECEC quality, common measures have been identified which are proven to help produce and assure high quality. These include measures which affect the *structure* of ECEC provision, the quality of the *processes* used in ECEC settings and the *outcomes* from ECEC provision.

- **Structural quality** includes measures such as the number of well-qualified staff; the design of the curriculum; the financial support and security of the setting; the ratio of staff to children; arrangements to ensure all children are treated fairly and in accordance with their individual needs; and the physical resources to meet the health and safety requirements of providing care and education for young children.
- **Process quality** looks at practice within an ECEC setting – it often includes the role of play within the curriculum; relationships between providers and children’s families; relationships and interactions between staff and children, and among children; the extent to which care and education is provided in an integrated way; the involvement of parents in the work of the ECEC setting and the day-to-day pedagogic practice of staff.
- **Outcome quality** is centred on the benefits for children, families, communities and society. Where these benefits relate to children’s outcomes they often include measures of children’s emotional, moral, mental and physical development; children’s social skills and preparation for further learning and adult life; children’s health and their school readiness.

Whilst each quality domain can be seen independently, together they form a balanced approach to improving the quality of ECEC provision.

Measuring Quality

In many countries, the quality of ECEC is measured through **external** evaluations providing information on the setting to policy makers and the general public. Quality of service is often set against a set of indicators – such as the **National Minimum Standards in Wales** – assessed by inspectors and underpinned by regulation. Such standards are commonly set around 'structural' indicators, such as staff-child ratios, indoor/outdoor space, staff qualification levels etc. In countries – including Wales – with 'split' ECEC, different standards are set for different settings or for different age groups of children. By contrast, in countries with 'integrated' ECEC the same standards are applied in all settings and across the early-years age-

range.

National standards for ECEC are common but not universal. In the Scandinavian countries, monitoring of service quality is often decentralised to local authorities with a greater focus on self-evaluation involving managers and practitioners themselves. Several tools are often used, including observations, interviews, rating scales, checklists, and surveys to produce an annual evaluation report. In **Korea**, Parent Monitoring Groups have been set up to visit childcare centres, observe and monitor the on-going activities and provide policy recommendations to local government.

Internal service evaluations can often be organised around self-evaluated 'quality assurance' schemes or the use of Rating Systems, such as the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) or the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS). These focus on different aspects of quality, including standards and/or regulations as well as staff quality or performance. They are better at capturing 'process' elements of quality such as the intensity and quality of interactions between adults and children, but have also been **criticised** for excluding some stakeholders including parents and local communities.

For children receiving Foundation Phase early education, the Welsh Government supports internal evaluation through the Early Years Development and Assessment Framework and the **Foundation Phase Profile**. Although aimed only at 3 to 7 year olds it has been designed to correspond with assessments carried out by health professionals to support earlier identification of possible developmental delays in younger children.

While service evaluations are seen as an important part of examining quality, on their own it is widely accepted that they are not enough to support all aspects of ECEC and drive quality improvement.

Staff Quality

The qualifications held by ECEC workers and the ratio of staff to children are measures often used to assess quality.

One of the main findings from **UK research** over the last decade has been that ECEC settings with higher quality rating scores are those where staff have higher qualifications (usually defined as relevant degree level or above). Even where most staff are not highly qualified, they benefit from the presence of a highly-trained colleague.

This is the model followed by Foundation Phase in maintained settings (ie. schools) where teachers are supported by less qualified additional practitioners. Where ECEC – including Foundation Phase – is delivered in non-maintained settings, however, **staff qualifications** are generally lower and higher-level leadership is not mandatory¹.

Again, **research** finds that the underpinning view of childhood dictates the importance of, and investment in practitioners. In countries with integrated, child-centred ECEC, most early years practitioners are graduates with rates of pay that make the profession attractive and confer a higher social status.

There is, however, also **evidence** that it is not the qualifications per se that have an impact on child outcomes, but the ability of the staff to create a high-quality environment. This is understandably difficult when in an **international context** and when compared to teachers, 'care' staff in Wales are poorly trained and poorly paid. Recruiting enough Welsh speaking staff is difficult and turnover in the sector is high making it challenging to develop practice in the way that research suggests is necessary.

In partial recognition of the issues, Welsh Government has published its **Childcare, Play and Early Years Workforce Plan 2017** to raise the skills of ECEC workers employed in childcare and play settings. The plan outlines changes to standards, training and qualifications for these members of the workforce. There is also an aspiration to make the sector a more attractive career choice.

Evidence is clear that low staff to child ratios are beneficial as they allow staff to focus on the needs of individual children. In Wales, the ratios for childcare in Wales are similar to other countries in the UK and the **OECD average**. However, in Foundation Phase settings the recommended ratio of 1:8 exceeds the OECD average of nearly 1:14.

Content, Methods and Practices for Learning

Curriculum and learning standards (pedagogy) within ECEC can have a significant impact on children's development. They are of particular importance in ensuring consistent quality across different settings, supporting staff by giving them guidance on how to enhance children's learning and well-being, and informing parents about what ECEC can do and what they as parents can do at home.

¹ The exception is in funded Flying Start settings where staff are required to hold higher qualifications than are required in other non-maintained provision.

The prevailing view of childhood within a country often dictates the practices for learning and development, and the outcomes and indicators used to measure children's progress. In countries where 'school readiness' is the primary objective, national measures of cognitive development are given priority (see the current **debate** in England around the introduction of the **Early Learning Goals**). In more child-centred cultures, practice is less prescribed and physical, social and emotional development are considered equally along with local priorities.

In Wales, the Foundation Phase provides a curriculum drawing on the key principles of child development to inform practice for children aged 3 to 7. Whilst 'early years' is one of the Welsh Government's stated **five cross-cutting priorities** and that Public Health Wales has a specific focus on the '**First 1,000 days**' there is no similar framework for children 0-3.

By contrast, in Scotland **The Early Years Framework** sets out a consistent approach to provision for children from pre-birth to age 8. It includes *Pre-Birth to Three: Positive Outcomes for Scotland's Children and Families*. This national guidance recognises the importance of pregnancy and the first years of life in influencing children's development and future outcomes.

Having a curriculum framework that extends across all ECEC **has been shown** to facilitate smooth transitions for children from one setting to another. Given the discontinuity in provision experienced by many young children in Wales, an all-age early years framework for practice would seem to be highly beneficial.

Organisational Structures

One of the major policy questions and choices all governments face in the ECEC area is to decide how services should be organised to enable their policy priorities to be realised.

Integrating 'Care' and 'Education'

In Wales and in many other countries, ECEC services are categorised as either early education or childcare with the split embodying different traditions of 'Care' and 'Education'.

Childcare evolved during the 19th century as a welfare measure for predominantly working class families who needed care to support employment. While some early education provision also existed at this time, it was not until the 1960s that the Pre-school Playgroup movement took-off, formed by mostly middle-class parents wanting to better prepare children for formal schooling. Early years 'Care' has maintained this association with working parents while early years 'Education' is assigned a higher importance, and in many countries has become a universal entitlement.

While split systems are still common, increasing **evidence** shows how the separation of 'education' and 'care' can undermine the delivery of quality ECEC. While no direct causal link can be established, a number of studies have found that in countries where education and care are integrated there are significantly lower levels of child poverty and inequality. Where systems are not integrated - such as in Wales - they exist side-by-side with relatively high levels of inequality, lower levels of maternal employment and child poverty (see **UNESCO, OECD, European Commission**).

It is argued that this is because in non-integrated systems not enough attention is paid to the cognitive development of children between the ages 0-3 years, whereas for children aged 3 and above, not enough attention is given to their health, social and emotional development. Where systems are integrated, a 'whole-child' approach means that children have greater opportunity to progress different aspects of development at their own pace. Age categories are therefore less important and services can incorporate goals for both care and education.

In Wales, Ministerial responsibility for the 'care' and 'education' of young children is currently separate. There are also different legal requirements for these two types

of settings:

- **The Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010** sets out the registration and inspection requirements for child minding and day care for children
- The inspection of settings that are eligible for funding to provide education for children before compulsory school age is governed by Schedule 26 of the Schools Standards and Framework Act 1998 as amended by the Education Act 2005. Details are set out in the Guidance handbook for inspecting care and education in regulated non-school settings eligible for funding for part-time education, issued jointly by Estyn and Care Inspectorate Wales in January 2019.

Provision is further delineated by age with services for children under 3 seen as 'care', designed to support parental employment. At age 3 years, children can access the part-time Foundation Phase, which although categorised as 'education', provides a more child-centred approach that has been called '**developmentally appropriate practice**'. Yet, because local authorities only have a **duty** to secure the delivery of a minimum of 10 hours a week of Foundation Phase for nursery age children at 3 and 4 years old children often attend a mix of settings across a day or a week.

It is not uncommon in Wales for a 3 year old to spend their mornings in a school nursery class and the afternoon in a day nursery or pre-school playgroup. In both settings they can follow the Foundation Phase, yet in the morning they are categorised as receiving 'education' but in the afternoon, 'care'. The distinction is reinforced by two regulatory systems, up to three different inspection systems² numerous funding streams with settings being paid different hourly rates. Yet, we are talking about the same child, with the same developmental and care needs.

According to **Professor Peter Moss**, Emeritus Professor of Early Childhood Provision at UCL Institute of Education, University College London, care and education in the early years are indivisible, necessary to nurture and develop the whole child. Providing both should be part of an ethic fully embedded in all ECEC relationships and practices.

Given the **evidence**, the separation of care and education would seem to be at odds with **the aspirations** of Welsh Government for children to have the best start in life, although recent research from the **Wales Centre for Public Policy** (WCPP) sets out how a more cohesive system might be delivered.

² Although this is changing to some extent with the introduction of '**Joint Inspections**'.

Administrative Integration

The responsibility for where ECEC should sit administratively varies widely. As is made clear in the **WCPP report**, in some countries responsibility has been allocated to one ministry, or sometimes departments have been merged. In others, an agency or department is designated to coordinate policy across administrative divides. Whichever route to integration is taken the **evidence** suggests that better outcomes for children – especially the most disadvantaged – are found in systems which are integrated both conceptually and structurally.

An important question in many countries is the extent to which care services should be further integrated within the education system. With limited existing ECEC infrastructure, schools in Wales are a natural focal point for families and children in most communities. A concern for many **commentators** however, is that expanding services into education can lead to the '**schoolification**' of early years. The principles underpinning the Foundation Phase and the **New Curriculum** should mitigate against this, but **some experts** fear that any downward pressure to adopt the content and methods of the primary school may have a detrimental effect on young children's learning and development.

Private, Voluntary and Public Services

There is a general agreement that direct provision of ECEC services by the government is not ideal in all circumstances, and that there is a role for the private and voluntary sector in supplying ECEC services that meet local needs.

Wales currently has a mixed-market of ECEC. Most 'care' services are provided by private or voluntary organisations, while 88% of Foundation Phase early 'education' is provided in schools. A large body of **research evidence** consistently finds that, on most indicators directly state-provided ECEC delivers higher quality and better outcomes for children. Professor of Early Childhood **Helen Penn**, argues that in the UK this is because the non-maintained sector struggles to make ends meet in a highly regulated environment where a significant amount of its income is 'fixed' by government subsidies. As these subsidies are attached mainly to working parents, there is little incentive for providers to operate in the most deprived areas.

The problem of low quality is therefore not related to the type of service but a system of financing that creates inequalities in provision, so that quality and equality cannot be achieved.

Universal and Targeted Services

If ECEC is seen to benefit children in their social, cognitive and emotional development, as well as facilitating maternal employment and reconciling work and family life, then it is argued by organisations such as the OECD and the EU that it should be provided universally.

The Heckman Equation: Economist and Nobel Laureate James Heckman's theory calculates the economic return from investing early in the child. His research shows that investment in early years can lead not only to improving children's opportunities in general, but can be measured directly in reductions in public expenditure, including criminal justice, welfare dependence, teenage pregnancy, academic achievement and referral to special education. When taking account of the productivity gains from facilitating mothers' employment also, the economic return from providing childcare is estimated to be up to ten times the costs of service provision.

The (Heckman) paradox is also that children from less resourceful families benefit disproportionately and for longer from high-quality childcare, compared to children who live in a more stimulating or better resourced family environment.

Based on this, and other **compelling evidence**, there is a growing consensus among researchers and policy makers that progressively moving towards the universal provision of publicly subsidised ECEC is both a priority and a necessity if the goal of reducing inequality is to be met.

In Wales, only the 10 hours per week of Foundation Phase is universally offered. While all other forms of ECEC can attract subsidies (or like the Welsh Government's Childcare Offer be 'free') they are most likely to be linked to employment rather than child development and equality outcomes. As highlighted by the **Children & Young People's Education Committee** such policies risk increasing inequality as disadvantaged children in non-working families are further disadvantaged by missing out on crucial early learning and development support.

While fiscal constraints have in the past driven the need to target ECEC interventions where they are most needed (eg. Flying Start), **recent studies** have found that children do better in universal systems where there is a social and economic mix.

Issues of access and funding are discussed fully in the third Paper in this series.

Conclusion: Key Principles of a Quality Framework

The **evidence** that poor quality ECEC provision offers very few benefits to children, families and society – and could actually have a negative impact – makes it important for policy makers to focus on the characteristics of provision that are associated with good quality. This is especially the case considering that quality is particularly important to those children who are most disadvantaged.

It would seem that there are a number of key quality principles that need consideration in Welsh policy for the potential of ECEC to be fully realised.

- An entitlement to universal rather than targeted ECEC provision from birth to the start of compulsory schooling is preferable. This is clearly aligned with the concept of **'progressive universalism'** that has been a particular political priority for the First Minister.
- **Studies** suggest that public policies need to be integrated with adequate and equitable funding to provide quality ECEC services – especially in deprived areas.
- The ECEC workforce is critical. **Sources** suggest that at least half the staff should hold a bachelors' level degree and working conditions which ensure low turn-over rates - ideally with the same status and pay as school teachers. In Wales, the language skills of practitioners are also critical in delivering Welsh-medium and bilingual ECEC.
- High quality ECEC is linked to a consistent curriculum approach across the age range which combines a broad national framework with the flexibility to meet local needs.
- Continuous improvement of ECEC provision requires internal and external evaluations. This needs to involve all stakeholders (including government, local authorities, settings, practitioners, parents, communities and children) developing a shared understanding of quality.

Recommended Reading:

Bennett, J. and Tayler, C.P., 2006. Starting strong II: Early childhood education and care. OECD, Paris.

Litjens, I., 2013. Literature Review on Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care. OECD, Paris.

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Penn, H. 2009. International Perspectives on Quality in Mixed Economies of Childcare. *National Institute Economic Review*, 207(1), 83–89