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Network on Early Childhood Education and Care

Quality Early Childhood Education and Care – What does it mean and how can it be monitored ?

Thematic Working Group on Monitoring Quality

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THEMATIC WORKING GROUP ON MONITORING QUALITY

**QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE – WHAT DOES IT MEAN AND
HOW CAN IT BE MONITORED?**

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INTRODUCTION

1. It is well established that quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) can make a significant difference in the ability of children to reach their full potential across academic, social, economic and physical spheres, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Effective monitoring is an essential component to improving quality ECEC service delivery.

2. *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care* provides a policy basis for considering this work. *Starting Strong III*, which was released in 2012, suggests that there are five key policy levers to encourage quality in ECEC:

- Setting out quality goals and regulations
- Designing and implementing curriculum and standards
- Improving qualifications, training and working conditions
- Engaging families and communities
- Advancing data collection, research and monitoring.

3. The aim of this paper is to explore key elements that are seen as integral to creating a quality early childhood learning environment and do so in a way that is accessible to both educators and families. The work would complement an Early Learning and Development Framework (refer to paper from Thematic Working Group on Early Learning and Development Framework and Outcomes).

4. The outcome should be a deeper understanding of what constitutes early childhood education and care 'service quality'.

WHY IS UNDERSTANDING KEY ELEMENTS OF QUALITY ECEC IMPORTANT ?

5. Through the OECD Network on Early Childhood Education and Care, there has been significant discussion of the importance of quality early childhood education and care and monitoring practices (including challenges to effective monitoring). At the December 2012 meeting, the Draft position paper of the Thematic Working Group on Monitoring Quality noted that a key issue is determining what should be monitored or evaluated. Several themes were discussed, including:

- The purpose for monitoring (e.g. to promote accountability, evaluate performance, policy development)
- Different approaches to monitoring (spectrum of approaches – external review, internal evaluation or a mixed model)
- Challenges of monitoring process quality
- Ensuring consistency in reviews

6. The overall aim of the paper was to shape Strand 1 of ‘Monitoring quality in early learning and development’ in the Programme for Work in 2013-14. It was agreed that for Strand 1, the work should focus on:

- monitoring service quality
- child development and well-being
- staff/quality and performance
- curriculum implementation

It was also noted that work should:

- encompass country examples of best practice
- highlight the importance of ‘process quality’ such as the quality interactions between staff and children and staff and parents
- highlight the importance of staff performance, training and service leadership

7. The special session on workforce quality reinforced the importance of monitoring workforce quality and staff performance, including what are determining factors. There is likely to be significant overlap between service quality and workforce quality.

8. In both cases, a range of indicators were proposed as relevant to this work.

9. At the December 2012 meeting, while there was significant discussion about relevant indicators for policy makers focussing on quality ECEC, the key question of what constitutes a high quality early childhood education and care program or service remained unanswered. The answer to that important question is likely to significantly influence the future work of the Network in this area, particularly with respect to:

- what data is needed to measure quality ECEC (and is that data available) ?
- what benchmarks or activities should be assessed ?
- how should those benchmarks or activities be measured, particularly the distinction between ‘structural’ and ‘process’ elements of quality ?

A COMMON UNDERSTANDING OF HIGH QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE?

10. Quality in ECEC programs or services can mean different things to different people. It has been recognised that quality is not a universal concept but depends on national curricula and cultural priorities.¹

11. For governments, the primary goals may be school preparedness, healthy socio-emotional child development, supporting parental workforce participation and promoting greater national productivity. For parents, it often focuses on having access to early childhood education services which they can trust to care for and educate their children and trying to do what they can to give their child the best possible opportunities in life. A common concern is to ensure a focus on play-based learning to allow children to be children.

12. The most successful ECEC systems appear to have managed to integrate broad based goals for quality child care (e.g. accessible, affordable and safe) with specific early childhood education objectives (e.g. quality provision, learning focussed, developmental outcomes). The integration of child care and early education contributes to a more holistic view of child development and greater clarity in objectives for

¹ Ishimine K, Tayler C, Bennet J (2010), Quality and Early Childhood Education and Care: A Policy Initiative for the 21st Century, International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy 2010, Vol 4, No, 2.

centres, educators, parents and other key stakeholders. The separation of ‘education’ from ‘care’ can impact on the delivery of quality goals in ECEC resulting in a lack of coherence for families, confusion about policy objectives, funding streams, regulatory frameworks, staff training and qualifications.²

13. *Starting Strong III* identified that the quality of ECEC is driven by a number of inter-related indicators, particularly:

- the quality of interactions and relationships between children and ECEC staff;
- the programs or curricula that support children’s learning and development;
- connections with family and community;
- leadership and management;
- the qualifications and training of staff and staff-to-child ratios;
- the physical environment;
- health and safety requirements.³

14. The indicators set out in *Starting Stronger III* provide an excellent starting point for examining service quality. Of course, a more detailed examination of service quality will also touch upon staff quality, child development outcomes and curriculum implementation.

15. The first three indicators are generally considered ‘process components’ of quality. The final four indicators are generally considered as ‘structural components’ of quality, and create the conditions necessary to achieve a high-quality learning and care environment.⁴

Structural quality

16. Structural (or contributing) quality refers to the overarching structures needed to ensure quality in early childhood programs, and is often ensured by the clear formulation and enforcement of legislation or regulations. The OECD notes that structural quality is a government responsibility which can be enforced via legislation or regulations.⁵ Typically, a selection of structural standards forms the substance of national licensing requirements. The table below sets out examples of elements of structural quality:

² Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2012), *Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing

³ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2006), *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing: Paris

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2006), *Starting Strong II: Early Childhood Education and Care*, OECD Publishing: Paris.

Service Quality Area	Examples of content
Leadership and management	effective leadership promoting a professional culture staff performance is evaluated effective administrative policies and procedures
Health and safety	a child's health needs are promoted adequate supervision effective hygiene practice nutritional food processes for dealing with illnesses or injuries
Quality of the physical environment	appropriate indoor and outdoor space appropriate furniture and equipment access to natural environment
Staff qualifications and training and child-staff ratios	the proportion of staff who are early childhood trained the level of early childhood training the ratio of staff to children according to age groups of the children

17. Most of the OECD data collected in relation to quality ECEC generally focuses on the structural components of quality. This often appears to be because structural quality elements which can largely be seen as input measures are more easily quantifiable.

Process quality

18. Process elements of quality influence the everyday nature of ECEC settings and directly influence the quality of the education program experienced by each child. Such components are more constructive in nature and require more in-depth observations than structural quality.⁶ The warmth and quality of the pedagogical relationship between educators and children, the quality of interaction between children themselves, and the quality of relationships within the educator team figure among the process goals most frequently cited.⁷

⁶ Ishimine (2010) Op Cit

⁷ OECD (2006) Op Cit

19. Process elements are not easy to measure and require a qualitative assessment to establish the quality of the early learning environment. Given the subjective nature of any such assessment, it is important that there is a consistent understanding of what constitutes a quality service, and if necessary, provides for gradients of quality. The table below sets out commonly found elements of process quality:

Service Quality Area	Examples of content
Educational program support learning outcomes	<p>the program takes into account the child's culture, individual development stage and characteristics</p> <p>the program is developed and overseen by an experienced and qualified pedagogical leader</p> <p>child's outcomes are monitored, documented and contribute to future program development</p>
The quality of interactions between educators and the children	<p>positive and responsive child-centric relationships based on trust and respect</p> <p>interactions are warm and child feels secure</p>
The quality of the interactions between the service and/or educators and the child's family and community	<p>parents/families and educators working together, including contributing to policies</p> <p>parents/families are welcome and valued in the service</p>

Regulating quality ECEC

20. Setting out a clear regulatory framework is a key policy lever to promote quality ECEC services. Research has shown that setting enforceable minimum standards can ensure the health and safety of children in ECEC environments and form a basis for improving quality service provision.

21. Minimum standards are generally set for structural quality indicators. For equity reasons, regulations outlining minimum standards often apply to all settings whether they are publically or privately owned and should cover infant-toddler, preschool and out of school provision. At the same time, regulations can recognise that different settings and age groups may require different standards.

Case example – the Australian National Quality Standards

Starting Strong III (and its predecessors) has been influential in guiding policy changes in several countries. In Australia, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care, which commenced on 1 January 2012 applies to most Long Day Care, Family Day Care, Outside School Hours Care and Preschool services.

The National Quality Framework is underpinned by a national legislative framework. The Framework has been designed to ensure it is applicable across all settings, with services defined as either centre based or family day care. There are some different requirements for the two service types and in some other situations.

The National Quality Framework sets out licensing requirements and minimum standards with respect to structural elements. It also establishes National Quality Standard which sets a national benchmark for the quality of early childhood education and care services. The National Quality Standard was informed by international research and evidence about best practice and the way in which high quality education and care contributes to positive outcomes for children.

The National Quality Standard (refer to Annex 1 [\[EDU/EDPC/ECEC\(2013\)5/ANN1\]](#)) comprises seven quality areas, 17 standards and 58 elements. The seven quality areas are:

- Educational program and practice;
- Children's health and safety;
- Physical environment;
- Staffing arrangements;
- Relationships with children;
- Collaborative partnerships with families and communities;
- Leadership and service management.

The National Quality Standard incorporates the drivers of quality defined by OECD in *Starting Strong III*. The quality areas combine structural components of quality (Quality Areas 2,3,4 and 7) and process components of quality (Quality Areas 1, 5 and 6). Greater emphasis is placed on the importance of process components (Quality Areas 1, 5 and 6) and Leadership and Management (Quality Area 7)

MONITORING QUALITY IN ECEC SETTINGS

22. Effectively monitoring ECEC is key to improving and ensuring that services are adequately preparing children for success. *Starting Strong III* defines monitoring as “the on-going evaluation of system performance for accountability as well as for rating program quality, highlighting trends and informing parental choice.”

23. There are a range of approaches to monitoring quality. The *Position Paper of the Thematic Working Group on Monitoring Quality*, presented to the Network on Early Childhood Education and Care in December 2012, outlined a range of ways different countries approach monitoring quality.

24. Countries may monitor aspects of program quality at different levels, including:

- child development or outcomes;
- level of service quality;
- regulation compliance;
- curriculum implementation;
- parent satisfaction.

As noted in the Thematic Working Group on Monitoring Quality - monitoring practices may involve:

- External evaluation:
 - inspections or independent assessment;
 - questionnaire/surveys;
 - evaluation reports;
 - rating against a scale.
- Internal evaluation:
 - self-assessment;
 - reflection.
- Combination of external and internal evaluation

25. Irrespective of the method of evaluation, a key component of effective monitoring is a common understanding of what constitutes quality ECEC delivery. This means unpacking each of the quality areas and developing a process for quality differentiation.

Case example – the Australian Assessment and Rating against the National Quality Standard

Within Australia, ECEC services are assessed against the National Quality Standard using a nationally consistent quality assessment and rating process.

The *National Quality Standard Assessment and Rating Instrument* was developed for use by regulatory officers to guide the assessment and rating of services. The document is used to:

- prepare for the assessment and rating visit;
- record observations and evidence during the visit to support the assessment, and
- determine ratings and prepare the report for the service after the visit.

The instrument is also a resource for services to better understand what constitutes quality ECEC service delivery. Each service will receive a rating for each quality area and an overall rating.

An extract of the instrument (Annex 2 [\[EDU/EDPC/ECEC\(2013\)5/ANN2\]](#)) sets out different gradients of quality for each quality area

Exceeding National Quality Standard – Service provides quality ECEC in all seven quality areas and goes beyond the requirements of the National Quality Standard in at least four of the seven quality areas (of which at least two include Quality Areas 1, 5, 6 and 7).

Meeting National Quality Standard – Service meets the new, higher National Quality Standard. It provides quality education and care in all seven quality areas.

Working Towards National Quality Standard – Service meets the minimum legal requirements to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of children, and provides a safe learning environment.

Significant Improvement Required – This service fails to meet the legislation and there is significant risk to the health, safety and wellbeing of children. The Regulatory Authority will take immediate action to address issues.

An additional rating of Excellent can be awarded through a separate process, if the service has received an overall rating of Exceeding National Quality Standard. An excellent service promotes exceptional education and care, demonstrates sector leadership and is committed to sustained excellent practice through continuous improvement.

All services will be assessed and rated at least once every three years. The frequency of assessment and rating visits will vary based on service's rating, with higher quality services assessed less frequently – this is referred to as 'earned autonomy'.

PROPOSED NEXT STEPS

26. To further the collective understanding of approaches to ECEC service quality it is proposed that at the June 2013 meeting the Network explore common examples of service quality and approaches to measurement or assessment of service quality.

27. The focus would be to use small group discussion to explore how countries approach service quality. For example:

- Are there particular service quality areas that are measured or assessed?
- Are there separate requirements for process quality?
- How is service quality assessed?
- Is the assessment of service quality linked to legislative or other regulatory requirements?
- Are there different quality requirements for different service types?

28. The Australian National Quality Standard and Australian Rating and Assessment Instrument would be used as case study to facilitate discussion within small groups.

29. Annex 3 [EDU/EDPC/ECEC\(2013\)5/ANN3](#) provides a useful template for this discussion.

30. The views expressed in the small group discussions would usefully inform the content of the proposed survey regarding 'monitoring quality' particularly with respect to what countries' views regarding ECEC service quality.

31. Other questions that could inform the content of the survey are in Annex 4 [EDU/EDPC/ECEC\(2013\)5/ANN4](#).

Recommendations

- The Network note this paper.
- The Network agree to undertake the Next Steps set out above.