



## Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

### RESEARCH BRIEF: ECEC QUALITY GOALS MATTER

#### What are quality goals?

There are wide-ranging expectations for quality goals among specific populations. For governments, the primary goal may be school preparedness and healthy socio-emotional child development. For working parents, it may be easy access to high-quality child care. For communities, it may be shared values. For minority groups, it may be transmitting the native culture and language. Thus, arbitrating the priorities of diverse interest groups presents a major challenge in defining the terms of quality goals.

#### What is at stake?

The objectives of centres are generally guided by the national (or local) quality goals, which set out the key goals of ensuring a quality early childhood system. These goals differ widely from country to country, and no doubt from decade to decade, but a common conviction is emerging across countries that broad quality goals should be set to stimulate further development and improvement of early childhood programmes. Fundamental differences in quality goals for child care and early education can characterise the ECEC sectors in countries operating split or two-tiered early childhood systems. The separation of “education” and “care” can, in some cases, undermine the delivery of quality goals. The result can be a lack of coherence for children and families, with a confusing variation in objectives, funding streams, operational procedures, regulatory frameworks, staff training and qualifications (OECD, 2006).

Competing ideas about childhood can help to explain the orientation of ECEC services. If the child is thought to be preparing for adulthood, early “child care” (generally, ages zero to three) is normally seen as the responsibility of parents with little government involvement (Dearing *et al.*, 2009). If, however, childhood is seen as an important stage of life, countries are more likely to integrate “child care” and “early education”, which contributes to more holistic child development and greater clarity in objectives for centres, practitioners, parents and other stakeholders (Bennett, 2008; OECD, 2006).

#### Why do quality goals matter?

Quality goals are important to give the “big picture” or bird’s eye view of ECEC. They are able to consolidate political will, a key step to increasing core programme funding. Quality goals can also provide incentives for governments to improve ECEC leadership and strategically align resources with prioritised quality areas (Council of Australian Governments, 2009).

At the same time, quality goals can promote more consistent, co-ordinated and child-centred services through a national framework with shared social and pedagogical objectives. Quality goals can provide more coherent ECEC services at every level. They can anchor policy discussions between ministries, provide guidance for providers, direction for practitioners, purpose for students and clarity for parents (OECD, 2006). Common objectives leading to the development of the “whole person” can prevent the

fragmentation of services, which can prevent early knowledge gaps and uneven child development (Eurydice, 2009).

### What matters most?

Goals give ECEC programmes their purpose and orientation. They should be specific but have enough flexibility for application (NIEER, 2004b; OECD, 2006). But on what subjects does research indicate it is important to set quality goals? Which aspects can impact ECEC quality?

### Goals for leadership, governance and funding

National governing bodies establish and reinforce ECEC quality goals. Integrated ECEC services – under a common authority – provide more co-ordinated and goal-oriented services (Bennett, 2008). A lead ministry or agency can increase the quality of provisions through direct funding, training practitioners and regularly evaluating programmes (CCL, 2006). At the same time, integrated services can better expand access to ECEC by raising public subsidies and reducing costs for families. The fragmentation of responsibility in split management systems can create inequality through uneven levels of quality provisions and the lack of coherent goals (OECD, 2001 and 2006).

Sustained public funding and regulation are necessary to achieve quality goals. First, generous core funding can ensure the recruitment of a highly professional staff who remain committed to improve children’s performance towards cognitive, social and emotional goals. Second, investment in ECEC facilities and materials can support a child-centred environment for learning and development. In the absence of direct public funding or parent subsidies, there is a risk of uneven and poor quality provisions with high-quality ECEC limited to affluent neighbourhoods (OECD, 2006).

### Minimum standards

Through a regulatory framework, minimum standards can guarantee the health and safety of children in high-quality environments and ensure a minimum level of quality. National regulatory frameworks can better “level the playing field” by ensuring all children benefit from a minimum quality of education and care. They can also greatly improve the conditions of learning and care through standardised high-quality instruction that can improve reading, math and language skills (Burchinal *et al.* 2009; OECD, 2001). Minimum standards also communicate with parents about the quality of services and help them make informed choices (OECD, 2006).

### Curriculum

The national curriculum or curriculum framework normally elaborates ECEC key goals, including underlying concepts and values (OECD, 2006). Despite country-level differences, broad curriculum aims include *learning to be* (to be confident and happy with one’s self); *learning to do* (experimentation, play and group interaction); *learning to learn* (specific pedagogical objectives) and *learning to live together* (respectful of differences and democratic values) (OECD, 2006; UNESCO, 1996).

It is generally agreed that more general goals (for well-being and socialisation) are appropriate for younger children, while specific cognitive aims are particularly useful for older preschoolers (Eurydice, 2009). A focus on skills rather than activities can help to make social and emotional goals more concrete (NIEER, 2004b).

### Workforce

The professionalization of the ECEC workforce can increase the likelihood of achieving broad-based education and care quality goals. Better educated practitioners with specialised training are more likely to

improve children's cognitive outcomes through larger vocabularies, increased ability to solve problems and increased ability to develop targeted lesson plans (NIEER, 2004a). Teachers' knowledge and ability to challenge children in their understanding is considered to be relevant for child development (Doverborg and Pramling Samuelsson, 2009). It is particularly important that ECEC staff understand the child's own perspectives in terms of strategies, approaches, communication and interplay. For example, a teacher who understands a child's interests and intentions for learning can match them with the goals of an ECEC curriculum (Sheridan, 2009).

Shonkoff and Philips (2000) find that the teacher's or caregiver's education and training are strongly associated with stable, sensitive and stimulating interactions. Educated staff are more likely to provide children with the stimulating, warm and supportive interactions that can lead to more positive social and emotional development outcomes (OECD, 2001). Education and training are also found to have an effect on the implementation and knowledge about the pedagogical approaches and curriculum (Elliott, 2006; Kagan and Kauerz, 2006).

### ***Parental and community involvement***

Research found that there is a substantial need and demand for a parental component in ECEC services (Deforges and Abouchaar, 2003) and also shows that parental involvement in ECEC services can enhance children's achievements and adaptation (Blok *et al.*, 2005; Deforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Edwards *et al.*, 2008; Harris and Goodall, 2006; Powell *et al.*, 2010; Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Weiss *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, parental involvement is independently associated with school performance and achievement from childhood through to mid-adolescence (Glass, 2004). Parents with clear information on quality goals are better able to raise important questions and concerns with practitioners about their children's ECEC experience. They can also provide greater support and continuity for learning at home (NIEER, 2004b).

Harmonising policy goals on quality and parents' needs plays a critical role in building reliability and accountability in early childhood education. When the goals are not able to meet parental needs and expectations, there is a tendency to send children to private institutions for extra-curricular activities in addition to kindergarten or child care centre. This can result in heavy financial burdens for parents, regardless of government subsidies. Therefore, it becomes essential to reflect parents' voices in the process of establishing quality goals (Shin, Jung and Park, 2009).

Furthermore, a strong community can act as a social network that supports parents to reduce stress, maintain positive emotions and provide tools for raising their child. Moreover, a continuum between ECEC services, parents, neighbours and other civil society stakeholders can enhance co-operation between different services leading to a comprehensive services approach (Litjens and Taguma, 2010).

### ***Data collection, research and quality monitoring***

There is increasing emphasis placed on ECEC data collection, research and quality rating systems aimed at achieving quality goals and raising standards. The evaluation of specific goals or outcomes can be important for policy makers, and child assessment can help identify special needs. However, child assessments can also unfairly rank young learners and lead to higher anxiety and lower self-esteem (OECD, 2001). To achieve evidence-based policy making, government administrations need to organise ECEC data collection in the ECEC field, conduct research on this topic and monitor the sector (OECD, 2006). Most ECEC programme evaluations focus on structural elements (funding, standards, staff, etc.) rather than children's learning outcomes through standardised tests and evaluation scales (OECD, 2006).

## What are the policy implications?

### *Placing well-being, early development and learning at the core of ECEC*

Children's well-being and learning are core goals of early childhood services, but services for children under age three are often seen as an adjunct to labour market policies, with infants and toddlers assigned to services with weak developmental agendas or goals. In some cases, it can be beneficial to focus more on the child and show greater understanding of the specific developmental tasks and learning strategies for young children. The ministry/ies in charge can address these issues with broad but realistic goals that focus on the child for all early childhood services (OECD, 2006).

### *Developing a quality framework*

Quality frameworks can include a broad range of elements, but, in general, they identify the key quality goals of early childhood services for a particular country or region. A systemic approach entails developing a common policy framework with consistent goals across the system and clearly-defined roles and responsibilities at both central and decentralised levels of governance (OECD, 2006). One policy option is the creation of an inter-departmental and/or intergovernmental co-ordination body to generate co-operative quality frameworks. Choi (2003) provides evidence that frameworks can work well when they are established for a specific purpose, for example, to co-ordinate a particular early childhood goal or to focus on a targeted quality issue.

### *Concentrating efforts towards integrated services*

The most successful ECEC systems have managed to integrate broad-based goals for "child care" with specific "early education" aims. Integrated systems are found to have increased public investment in ECEC and eliminate artificial age categories (Bennett, 2011). Adopting a more integrated approach to the field allows government ministries to organise agreed policies and goals and combine resources for early childhood services. Regulatory, funding and staffing regimes, costs to parents and opening hours can be made more consistent. Variations in access and quality can be lessened, and links at the services level – across age groups and settings – are more easily created. In integrated systems, a common vision of education and care can be forged with agreed social and pedagogical objectives and goals (NIEER, 2004b; OECD, 2001). The *Starting Strong* reports found that integrated ECEC services at governance level are better able to provide quality ECEC services.

It is important in this process that early childhood policy making should be placed in a ministry that has a strong focus on the development and education of young children.

### *Delegating responsibility to local stakeholders*

Devolution of tasks in the early childhood field can be needed or useful, not only as the concrete acknowledgement of the rights of families and local communities, but also for reasons of practical management. Numerous providers and fragmented provision patterns in the early childhood field can make it difficult for central governments to ensure quality and appropriate provision of services, especially in the absence of devolved local management. A shift towards more devolution can also be motivated by the desire to bring decision making and delivery closer to the families being served and to adapt services to meet local needs and circumstances (OECD, 2006).

Central authorities can delegate responsibility to centres and school-based institutions to manage a variety of tasks, including implementation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting. Local authorities can better co-ordinate with parents and communities to determine the appropriateness of national ECEC goals (Mahon, 2011).

## ***Strengthening institutional performance for improvement and accountability***

Through generous core funding, the government and ECEC services are more likely to achieve quality goals: for example, ECEC providers can innovate curriculum to better meet local needs, hire more qualified practitioners, stimulate parental and community involvement, and advance data collection, research and monitoring (OECD, 2006). Ministries or local authorities may provide added financial incentives for ECEC providers to reach quality goals by making core funding contingent on achieving a specified quality goal. Financial tracking and monitoring of the achievement of quality goals is important, as it contributes to accountability, helps inform planning and resource allocation, and can contribute in the future to strengthening policy making (OECD, 2006).

### **What is still unknown?**

#### ***Research on target quality aspects***

The literature has helped to identify key areas where quality goals are likely to help improve quality in ECEC, as listed above. However, there is not sufficient research on “best practice” for each intervention. For example, workforce is the key factor in improving child outcomes. Experimentation with reward systems has been undertaken at the school level in the United States; however, little emphasis has been placed on ECEC. Research in this area has great potential to inform policy practice by answering questions such as, “Does accountability in ECEC systems improve outcomes?”, and, “If so, to what extent?”

Another example is curriculum. There is a general consensus that quality goals must be adapted to diverse needs namely for low-income, immigrant and ethnic groups (OECD, 2001). Broad-based adaptation is often considered expensive, and there is little information on the actual measures of adaptation in place in ECEC environments. More research is needed to answer questions such as: “Do current adaptation measures enable disadvantaged children to achieve shared quality goals?”, and, “What still needs to be done?”

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