
Paper 1

Quality in Childcare Services

■ BACKGROUND TO THE SEMINAR

The European Commission Childcare Network was established as part of the EC Second Equal Opportunities Programme; it consists of an expert from each member State and a Co-ordinator. In 1988, it produced a major report on childcare policies and services throughout the European Community – **Childcare and Equality of Opportunity**. As part of its continuing work, the Network has been funded by the Commission to organise four technical seminars on priority issues - rural families, childcare workers with young children, quality services and men as carers of young children. The specific objective of these seminars is to make recommendations for action for the Commission to consider in preparing (i) the European Community's Third Equal Opportunities Programme, which begins in 1991; and (ii) a Recommendation on Childcare, which will form part of the Action Programme to implement the Social Charter.

Whilst the Network has been established as part of an Equal Opportunities Programme, and retains a strong commitment to supporting equal treatment for women in employment, it has emphasised that the needs and interests of children must also be a major concern; it is not enough just to provide places to park children while their parents go out to work. However, the Network has not seen the two interests of women and equal opportunities, and of children - as in opposition. Both can be met and are indeed inter-dependent, since services that are adequate in quantity but poor in quality will be a major obstacle to employment for many women – without access to good quality services, women will only use services as a last resort.

In its 1988 Report, the Network concluded that childcare services must be of good quality as well as sufficient quantity. It distinguished between the setting of minimum standards, which was necessary to protect children and childcare workers from harm and exploitation, and quality – “while the setting of standards is a necessary part of the regulation of services, they do not guarantee good quality”. It also concluded that in general “services have failed to tackle the issue of quality” and that “work is urgently needed to define, monitor, develop and maintain quality”.

Three other relevant points were emphasised in the Report:

“(Achieving quality) will be a major undertaking. The issues involved are as complex, in their own way, as those facing high technology industries, and need to be tackled with the same sort of input of resources and the same sort of priority. An enormous amount of work needs to be done....

Quality is an issue that applies not only to individual childcare services, but also to the overall childcare system...it is important to look at the whole as well as its parts and to invest in quality (at both levels)....

Until publicly funded childcare services are available to all parents who want them, services that are not publicly-funded should be offered the opportunity to participate in the general system of quality control and development”.

THE SEMINAR PROGRAMME AND THE PREPARATION OF THIS REPORT

The seminar on quality in childcare services was held in Barcelona and organised by the Spanish representative on the Childcare Network, Irene Balageur, and the Network co-ordinator, Peter Moss. The seminar had 31 participants, drawn from all Member States, and including eight members of the Childcare Network; a full list of participants is provided in Appendix 1.

The seminar was organised around two keynote papers. These papers were jointly written by Irene Balageur, Head of Pre-school services in Barcelona, and Helen Penn, formerly Head of Pre-school services in Strathclyde Regional Council in Scotland, in consultation with Spanish and British colleagues. The first paper was concerned with defining quality, while the second considered actions which could be taken at different levels of government to assure services of good quality. Most of the seminar was organised to discuss these two papers, mainly in small working groups. Discussants for the first paper were Liliane Perier (France) and Patrizia Ghedini (Italy). As an introduction to the second paper, Marta Mata, Chair of the Education Committee in Barcelona, described the current reform of the Spanish education system, which provided an example of an action by Central Government intended to improve quality of services. In the reform, the age group 0-6 was recognised as the first stage of the education system, with services organised into two cycles – 0-3 and 3-6 and becoming the responsibility of education authorities.

In addition, one session in the seminar was allocated to a preliminary discussion on the wider issue of quality of childhood. For this session, a keynote paper was prepared by Monika Jaeckel (Germany), with Ole Langsted (Denmark) as discussant.

The final conclusions and recommendations presented below have been prepared by the Network members who attended the seminar – Irene Balageur (Spain), Marie Louise Carels (Belgium), Bronwen Cohen (UK), Patrizia Ghedini (Italy), Monika Jaeckel (Germany), Anne McKenna (Ireland), Peter Moss (Co-ordinator) and Eduarda Ramirez (Portugal). In making this report, the Network members have drawn heavily on the seminar discussions and the conclusions of the working groups.

Given the difficult nature of the subject, there was an encouraging level of agreement on many points. There were however disagreements, and these are referred to in the Conclusions. In general, disagreements did not follow North v South lines; the main keynote papers were examples of collaboration between Northern and Southern Europe, and there were other examples during the seminar of perspectives shared between North and South. If there was any pattern to the disagreements, it was a tendency for the participants from one Member State to have rather different perspectives on several key issues.

The fact there was some disagreement was not only to be expected but also to be welcomed. An essential part of the process of developing a truly European **community** involves dialogue and the exchange of ideas. As a result of this process, all of us in Europe will learn more about what we share in common and what are the main differences between us. There is a richness in diversity; we can all gain from exploring, understanding and respecting different perspectives.

■ THE KEYNOTE PAPERS (SEE APPENDIX 2 FOR THE FULL TEXTS)

Because the papers by Irene Balageur and Helen Penn played such a central role in the seminar, a brief summary of their main points is necessary.

The first paper, on defining quality, emphasised a number of points by way of introduction:

1. “Defining quality is an inherently value-based exercise. This means there will never be a total consensus. The aim of the paper is to explore to what extent there may be a ‘core’ area of shared values and actions arising from them, where consensus or near consensus may be achieved”.
2. “There are three major perspectives in looking at quality: that of the children themselves; the views of parents and families; and the perspectives of the professionals directly or indirectly looking after children...Parents are not a homogeneous group...Professionals by virtue of their training tend to hold more similar views amongst themselves but may also differ amongst themselves”.
3. “Any definition of quality is to an extent transitory; understanding quality and arriving at quality indicators is a dynamic and continuous process...It is not a prescriptive exercise.”

The paper sought to define quality on the basis of the needs of children, which in turn were drawn from the authors’ own beliefs about children’s rights. These included the right of the child to:

- a healthy life;
- spontaneous expression;
- be esteemed as an individual;
- dignity and autonomy;
- self-confidence and zest in learning;
- a stable learning and caring environment;
- sociability, friendship and co-operation with others;
- equal opportunities irrespective of race, gender and disability;
- cultural diversity;
- be part of a family and community.

The heart of the paper was the outlining of 10 areas or parameters each of which needed to be considered in discussing quality and assessing the quality of a service. Within each area, a number of indicators were proposed. These indicators were presented as a series of questions. For example, in the area or parameter of **Environment**, indicators included Are the surroundings inside and outside safe?, Is there access for children or adults with disabilities? These parameters and indicators provided a framework within which more specific criteria and checklists could be developed (for example, developing an operational definition of a ‘safe’ environment); the process of arriving at suitable criteria was seen as an active process of debate and discussion with all those involved. Alternatively, without further elaboration, the framework could provide a useful guide to looking at services, providing an *aide memoire* of items to be considered.

The ten areas or parameters were:

1. Ease of Access and flexibility of Usage;
2. Physical Environment, and in particular the extent to which it promotes health and safety, aesthetic and intellectual pleasure and stimulation;

3. Range of Learning Activities;
4. Relationships, between children, between children and workers and between workers;
5. Role of Parents, and in particular the ways in which their views are understood and reflected;
6. The extent to which the service was part of the Local Community;
7. Valuing the Diversity of children, particularly in relation to race, gender and disability;
8. Assessment and review of children and their progress, and the availability of special help;
9. Cost benefits and financial control (good value for money);
10. Ethos, and the coherence of all aspects of the service.

The second paper attempted to provide an analysis of actions by Government at different levels that were needed to ensure services were of high quality; and that children had equal access to high quality services. It was recognised that the appropriate level of Government to take a particular action might vary between Member States. In general, at a central government level the requirements for quality assurance of services were defined as:

1. a coherent and co-ordinated approach to services;
2. a clearly stated policy, including clear objectives;
3. an appropriate legislative framework;
4. adequate investment of resources;
5. planning, monitoring and research;
6. training for all workers.

At a local or regional level, the following requirements were defined:

1. coherence and co-ordination in the running of services;
2. a clearly stated policy covering aims, objectives and levels of provision;
3. development plans drawn up after close consultation with all interested parties;
4. adequate resourcing;
5. planning and monitoring at local level;
6. a structure of advice and support to promote and maintain quality;
7. organisation and regulation of staffing;
8. research and development.

As the above list illustrates, the role of government at national and regional/local levels are closely connected and complementary; regional and local government will often be responsible for ensuring the interpretation and implementation of national policy in a way that is appropriate to local needs and circumstances. It should also be emphasised that because government has responsibility for action does not mean that government necessarily has to be the agent for taking action. Responsibility implies that government should ensure that action is taken; the question of which agency is most appropriate to take action is a separate issue.

■ CONCLUSIONS

1. There was complete agreement on the need to ensure good quality services and to ensure equal access for all children to these services; quality and access must go together. This general objective, however, is compatible with diversity of services, in which parents have choice between different types of service.
2. The seminar did not produce an agreed definition of quality, and indeed this was never a realistic objective. Defining quality, and developing services that are of good quality, is a long-term process. The process itself is important; it provides an opportunity for different individuals and interest groups to exchange ideas and perspectives, to gain new insights and understanding and to identify shared views and areas of legitimate difference.

The important issue therefore is to ensure that the process of exploring quality – what it means and how to achieve it – is actively encouraged and pursued at all levels of the Community, from the Europe-wide level to the level of individual services; and that all Member States are committed to developing definitions of quality and actions to promote quality.

Finally it should be emphasised that ‘quality’ use a dynamic and subjective concept, because it is value-based and European societies are pluralistic and constantly evolving; concepts of quality therefore will vary between different groups and over time according to the values that are held and the priority given to particular values. A major challenge is to develop concepts and definitions of quality; backed by actions to promote good quality, that are consistent with diverse values in plural societies and diversity of services. At the same time, exploration of concepts of quality may also show that a high degree of consensus exists on certain values, allowing a high degree of agreement on certain features of quality combined with diversity of views on other features.

3. There was a high level of agreement that the 10 areas or parameters of quality were very useful and could make a valuable contribution to the process of discussion about quality; that this degree of agreement existed was a very important conclusion. The parameters emphasised the wide range of issues that might be taken into account in considering quality. They encouraged a broad and discriminating approach to assessing quality which recognised that a service might have strengths in some areas and weaknesses in others.

Discussions during the seminar suggested ways in which some of the parameters could be further developed, and two other parameters were proposed to be added to the ten presented in the first keynote paper - child happiness or satisfaction; and the advocacy function of childcare services in the improvement of the quality of life for children. A third area was also raised by some participants, covering childcare workers.

The set of parameters might be useful not only for stimulating debate about quality, but as a practical method for helping people to review specific services. They could be applied to a wide range of services and could be used by a wide range of groups (parents, workers, managers etc.). In this case, however, it was emphasised that the parameters should not be used in a punitive or prescriptive way, but as a sensitive and constructive tool for developing and improving quality. They should be applied flexibly, to reflect the values and priorities of the group using them, who could give particular weight to the parameters they felt to be most important; in other words, the importance attached to each parameter could and should be determined in each individual case, rather than equal significance being attached to each parameter.

4. A second approach to the issue of quality was emphasised by some participants – a focus on children’s development and the definition of conditions in childcare settings which are most likely to foster development. There is already a substantial body of research which has begun to identify such conditions.

However it needs to be recognised that this approach is value-based, and that it takes a relatively narrow, albeit important, perspective; it does not address many of the areas covered by the parameters of quality introduced in the first keynote paper. There seems no reason why both approaches – and indeed other approaches – should not be considered in the process of defining quality and how best to promote good quality.

5. While there was considerable agreement on the value of the 10 quality areas in the first keynote paper, there was less agreement over the attempt in the paper to base these quality areas on the rights of the child. Some participants agreed with this approach, wishing to place emphasis on the rights of the child. Others has reservations. Many felt that the subject of rights required much more discussion, which would need to consider how the list put forward in the paper related to other attempts to define the rights of children (for example, by the United Nations). Others felt the list combined very concrete and very abstract propositions. There was also a view that any definition of quality based on rights would need to take account of the rights of other groups, for example of women, parents, workers. One participant commented that children and parents could not be considered separately.

The problems encountered with the approach taken in the keynote paper should not distract attention from the need to undertake more work on the value-bases on which definitions of quality can be developed; the development of a value-base from a concept of rights should be one option to be examined as part of that work. The work on value-bases needs to be part of the process of defining quality which is so necessary. While the means to achieve quality may be essentially a technical question, the definition of quality can never be – it must always be a political question, using that term in its broadest and most positive sense.

6. There was total agreement that childcare services were a public issue and that governments (national, regional and local) have a major responsibility for childcare services – not necessarily to provide services directly, but to ensure adequate resources and other conditions to ensure equal access to good quality provision.
7. In general, there was agreement that governments needed to ensure action to promote quality and in the areas outlined in the second part of the paper, for example a coherent and co-ordinated approach, clear policy statements, legislative frameworks, providing and allocating resources, planning and monitoring, advice and support, staffing and training. Which level of government had responsibility for different actions might vary between countries. It was also emphasised that government responsibility was to ensure that action was taken in relevant areas, and not necessarily to take the action itself; government’s task was to guarantee quality services (and equal access by all children to these services) and to see that whatever action was needed to achieve this objective was taken.

There was however some concern expressed from the participants from one country. They felt the paper was based on an over-centralised view, and that solutions needed to be sought which were highly decentralised and gave much greater control and power to grass-roots and particularly to parents. There was a fear and distrust of government, at whatever level, including the dangers of bureaucracy and the imposi-

tion of a conformity which would halt any attempt to develop diverse services that were responsive to parents' wishes. The main role of government was to provide the resources to enable parent and other community groups to develop their own solutions, and not to impose conditions and standards on these initiatives.

While recognising the importance of parents, other participants questioned giving such prominence to this group. They argued that the needs of children cannot only be defined by parents, and that other groups had a substantial interest in services.

While noting this important area of disagreement, the main conclusion would be that there needs to be a process in each Member State involving the development of a programme of action to promote and support quality in services, and that government at all levels has a basic responsibility to ensure that such a programme is developed and implemented.

8. The session on quality of childhood was very important, if far too short. The keynote paper provided a critique of the present situation of children in Germany, which emphasised a number of negative features – for example, the exclusion of children from adult and public life, the increasing isolation of children and the constraints on their mobility, and a general hostility towards children in social structures. The discussant to the paper took a rather more positive view, based on the position in Denmark. He argued that there were signs of a long-term trend towards the humanisation of childhood – though he also agreed that there were areas where society gave very low priority to children, for example with respect to parents' working hours, traffic, inadequate planning, lack of childcare services etc.

The initial discussion on childhood emphasised the need for more work on this important subject. Further analysis is needed on childhood in different parts of Europe and on how to promote a child-oriented Europe. This in turn relates to the earlier discussion about the rights of children – what sort of quality of life, what sort of experiences, what sort of environment do children have the right to expect, not only to maximise their future development but also as citizens of Europe?

Discussion of childcare services and of quality in these services, can best occur in the context of a discussion about quality of childhood (and in the context of other discussions such as equality of opportunity). This approach would emphasise the need to develop services that are available to all children, and not just think narrowly in terms of services for children with employed parents. It would emphasise that the rationale for services relates to the needs of children as well as equality of opportunity – a rationale that increases the case for more and better services for children, to meet a variety of child and parent needs.

9. The exchange of ideas and experience has a vital role to play in the process of defining quality and developing action to promote quality. Such exchanges can help to develop concepts, identify areas of similarity and difference and disseminate knowledge and experience from centres of excellence, for example in each of the areas or parameters of quality and in different types of action to promote quality.
10. There was some disagreement about the usefulness of developing minimum standards, which might be regarded as protecting children against harm or providing a 'bottom line' below which any talk of quality was impossible. Some expressed concern that such standards might be trivial compared to the complexity and scope of conditions needed to ensure good quality; might be too mechanistic or rigid to be useful; or might distract attention from the more important issue of promoting quality, for example by becoming the only or main objective of government. Other participants felt that some 'bottom line' was important, either as a first step to better quality or to ensure some control over services receiving pub-

lic funding; for example, if the EC Structural Funds were to be used to develop services, as advocated by the Network, then some conditions should be attached to services receiving this type of finance.

On balance, therefore, a short-term exercise to establish minimum standards would be useful in Member States (where this has not already been done) and also by the EC to provide guidance on the use of Structural Funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE NETWORK MEMBERS AT THE SEMINAR

1. TO THE COMMISSION

1. There should be a Directive on Childcare Services, setting as a general objective equal access for all children to good quality services. The Directive should require Member States to develop – over the next five years – a definition of ‘good quality’ applicable to all forms of services; and a strategy for promoting quality. This strategy should include the development of a system of monitoring which would enable Member States to report on progress in achieving the general objective.

In arriving at a definition of quality, and in developing an action strategy, there should be a process of widespread consultation and discussion with all groups involved. Definitions of quality should be consistent with and recognise the importance of diversity, both among families needing services and different types of services.

2. The Commission should support the process of developing definitions of good quality through funding the translation, printing and distribution of a revised version of the parameters of quality from the first keynote paper. The authors of the paper should be asked to make revisions in the light of comments made at the seminar and by other members of the Network.¹
3. The Commission should further support the process of developing definitions of good quality and programmes of action to promote good quality by funding a programme of work to encourage an exchange of ideas and experience. This programme would include a number of European seminars; visits and exchanges; and the production of documents. A specific project would be a seminar to discuss reaction from Member States to the revised version of the quality parameters.

Specifically, there should be two European conferences to discuss (i) definitions of quality; and (ii) action to promote quality. These should take place in 1993 and 1994 and provide an opportunity to review, and exchange information about, what action is being taken in Member States in each of these areas – in other words, they should provide a progress report on the process of developing work on quality.

4. The Commission should produce, as a matter of priority, standards for childcare services to be applied in funding childcare services or related projects (for example, staff training) through the Structural Funds.
5. The Commission should fund a European Conference to examine the quality of childhood in the Community, to discuss ways of making European society more child-oriented and to improve in other ways the quality of life of children in Europe. The conference should be asked to make recommendations for further action to the Commission.

1. It is hoped that this revised version of the parameters of quality will be available in Spring 1991.

2. TO MEMBER STATES

1. Member States should make a clear commitment, as a policy objective, to develop services to ensure that all children have equal access to good quality services within a specified time-span of between 5 and 10 years. This commitment should recognise that there is a public responsibility for childcare services and to ensure the attainment of the policy objective. In making their commitment, Member States should also make it clear that this is consistent with diversity in provision and recognising diversity among families in needs and circumstances.
2. Member States should initiate a process of developing a definition of good quality and a strategy for promoting quality in services. This process should be publicly funded and involve wide consultation and discussion. It should be completed within a five year period, though being subject to regular review.
3. Member States should support work on the quality of childhood in their societies, including discussion about what a good quality of childhood should involve, an examination of the current situation for all children and what action should be taken to achieve a good quality of childhood.

■ APPENDIX 1

LIST OF SEMINAR PARTICIPANTS

Irene Balageur (Spain)*
Marie-Louise Carels (Belgium)*
Bartolo Campos (Portugal)
Laura Cipollone (Italy)
Bronwen Cohen (UK)*
Isabel Cruz (Portugal)
Warnfried Dettling (Germany)
John Doyle (Ireland)
Gisela Erler (Germany)
Annalia Galardini (Italy)
Patrizia Ghedini (Italy)*
Monika Jaeckel (Germany)*
Claude Janizzi (Luxembourg)
Michele Ladriere (Belgium)
Ole Langsted (Denmark)

Anne McKenna (Ireland)*
Gentile Manni (Belgium)
Juan Mestres (Spain)
Peter Moss (UK) *
L. Meijer (Netherlands)
Edward Melhuish (UK)
Despina Papazoglou (Greece)
Helen Penn (UK)
Liliane Perier (France)
Aage Petersen (Denmark)
Eduarda Ramirez (Portugal)*
Dorothy Rouse (UK)
Patrick Thomas (France)
A. van der Wel (Netherlands)
*member of EC Childcare Network

■ APPENDIX 2

KEYNOTE PAPERS FROM THE SEMINAR

■ QUALITY IN PRE-SCHOOL SERVICES

Irene Balageur, Patronat Municipal de Guarderies, Ajuntament de Barcelona, Spain; and **Helen Penn**, Strathclyde Regional Council, UK

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Two papers are being presented which address the question of whether there are recognisable indicators of “quality” in pre-school services, and if so, how can they be promoted?

Defining quality is an inherently value-based exercise. This means there will never be a total consensus. The aim of the two papers is to explore to what extent there may be a “core” area of shared values and actions arising from them, where consensus or near consensus may be achieved.

Any examination of systems of pre-school services within individual Member States, as well as across Member States, reveals wide differences in levels of provision, and wide differences in the aims and intentions of those providing the services.

Typically there are divisions between under threes and over threes; between health orientated systems of care, and learning orientated systems of education; between the need to target scarce resources, and the need to provide a universal or non-stigmatising service; between state control and private responsibility; between professionalisation and local control. And so on. Pre-school services show an extreme diversity. This diversity is at its most marked in Britain, but other member states also have to address issues of fragmentation and lack of coherence of services.

These administrative and structural divisions reflect differences in values. What do we believe young children can do? What kind of children do we want? What kind of skills and aptitudes do we want to encourage? Who holds the responsibility for encouraging them? Developmental psychology gives us clues, but these questions are essentially political and cultural (1).

Does the diversity of European culture mean that such differences are inevitable? Or even if the values which are emphasised in a particular setting vary considerably, are there common parameters which are acceptable to those organising the services, those working in the services, and those using the services? If these parameters exist, how should services be monitored and regulated to operate within those parameters?

The levels of provision which are available vary considerably, and therefore children’s access to pre-school services is unequal. And the services themselves vary, so that even children who do gain access have very unequal kinds of experiences. Should this inequality be tolerated? It would for instance be unacceptable in mainstream education where a minimum level of education is the right of every child. What is that minimum for pre-school services? Should we set targets and objectives? Should we spell out what we consider is good, and outline strategies to achieve it?

We have assumed that there are certain basic values about looking after children, and that there are certain basic steps which government at national and local level can undertake to ensure a minimum level of quality services. We also assume that diversity of services is not an advantage if it implies that some children fare less well than others; or conversely that centrality and universality of provision is not acceptable if it implies that the system cannot offer flexibility and choice.

Paper One looks at the idea of quality at the level of the nursery or childcare setting and the daily experiences of the children who attend. Who decides what is good practice, and what is good quality care?

Paper Two examines the idea of quality assurance at local and national government levels.

Both papers consider the idea of quality and quality assurance in relation to the private and voluntary sector as well as to the public sector, since the reality is that for most under-twos, and frequently for over-twos, daycare services are located in this private and voluntary sector.

The ideas discussed in the two papers arose in the first instance out of daily practice. Within Barcelona and within Strathclyde we have been engaged in a struggle to articulate and define the aims and objectives of the services we run, to develop and to improve them, and to monitor and regulate the outcome. The ideas we present are those which have then tested out in other local and national forums in our respective countries.

In both Barcelona and Strathclyde, we are attempting to provide a coherent service within an education department. However, in Barcelona, developments are being carried out in a supportive national framework, where the government nationally contributes legislatively and financially to underwrite reforms, and regards developments in Barcelona as a helpful model. In Strathclyde developments are being carried out in the absence of a coherent government position. Generally the British Government believes in a free market philosophy and holds that most state control is wrong. Their view is that the private market should be encouraged to provide all necessary services. Therefore Strathclyde's developments have had a relatively hostile reception. The service base is low, new money is not forthcoming, and the legislative framework inhibits new initiatives.

Nevertheless, despite these differences, and linguistic and cultural differences, we have found it possible to arrive at a common view of quality and quality assurance.

The papers draw on the experiences of two non-EC members, both of whom have made considerable attempts to develop and co-ordinate provision, Sweden and New Zealand (2, 3). In Sweden the emphasis has been on state funded publicly provided services. In New Zealand the emphasis has been on state funded voluntary provided services. In both cases all pre-school services have been integrated into one department at all levels. In Sweden it is Social Services which is the lead Ministry. In New Zealand it is Education.

The Swedish report "Good Daycare for Small Children" is one of the few attempts to comprehensively address the issue of quality in pre-school services, and outline strategies for action to achieve it. The report makes interesting suggestions which will be discussed in the papers. However, one of the main points of the report is that no matter how good a nursery, it will reflect the conditions existing in the society as a whole. The extent to which pre-school services are reflective of the communities they serve will be discussed in a separate paper to be presented during the seminar. In our two papers we focus on pre-school services, but note that our perspective is part of a wider debate about children, about the care and attention with which they are regarded, and the status which they command in society.

REFERENCES

1. Kagan, J., **The Nature of the Child**. Basic Books. New York, 1984.
2. Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, Sweden. **Good Daycare for Small Children**. 1981.
3. Ministry of Education, New Zealand. **Before Five**. 1989.

■ PAPER ONE

DEFINING QUALITY: the daily experiences of children in preschool services and the factors which influence them

There are three major perspectives in looking at quality: that of the **children** themselves; the views of **parents and family**; and the perspective of the **professionals** directly or indirectly looking after the children. The perspective of the children can only be inferred from observation and measures of outcome. As Kagan states: 'the behaviour of infants is essentially ambiguous'. Although there may be gross indicators of distress or pleasure, for very young children, at least, mood or volition has to be guessed.

Parents are men and women who are bringing up children. Although they may have common interests, they are not a homogeneous group, but are as individual as their children. A parent may have different criteria from professionals. For example, she may consider maintaining family income as a priority for family stability, and therefore seek daycare – whereas professionals may argue that other forms of care are more appropriate for her child. Parents from a black community may feel strongly that white professionals do not fully understand the pressures and oppressions that their children experience. A parent might have a decided view about gender – about the right way to bring up boys and girls – which conflicts with professional opinion. There may be differences about discipline and if and how children should be punished. Professionals sometimes argue that by virtue of their training and experience they have the best interests of the child at heart, and are in a better position to judge than parents what is best.

Professionals by virtue of that training tend to hold more similar views amongst themselves. Professional groups who are organised into associations or unions are in a position to present their views with more authority or influence. But they may also differ amongst themselves, according to whether they are committed to an educational approach or a health and care approach, or whether they are researchers or grass roots practitioners. The lack of coherence in services is often reflected in the different perceptions of different professional groups.

Any definition of quality is to an extent transitory; understanding of quality and arriving at quality indicators is a dynamic and continuous process of reconciling the emphases of different interest groups. It is **not** a prescriptive exercise. On the other hand it needs to be a detailed exercise which is of direct practical use to those working with young children.

How do we view children? What kind of expectations do we hold? What kind of children do we want? Assumptions about what children need and how adults might provide it have varied widely even this century. Very generally there is a consensus in much of the current child development and education literature that children need to feel loved, respected and listened to; that they are sociable and enjoy the company of other children and adults besides their immediate family; and that through affection, through social intercourse, and with a stimulating environment, they mature, learn and develop a remarkably wide range of skills and competencies in the first five or six years. This learning and development assumes a basic level of physical well-being.

We can therefore make informed guesses about what young children need. But our understanding is relative and is coloured by our wider social perceptions and values. We recognise that in stating the needs of children we are also making a statement about our own beliefs. We have therefore expressed those beliefs as a statement about childrens' rights.

We respect the right of the child:

- to a healthy life
- to spontaneous expression

- to be esteemed as an individual
- to dignity and autonomy
- to self-confidence and zest in learning
- to a stable learning and caring environment
- to sociability, friendship, and cooperation with others
- to equal opportunities irrespective of race, gender and disability
- to cultural diversity
- to be part of a family and a community

What are some of the components of daily experience in services to young children which might lead to these very broad ends?

We suggest that there are a number of indicators of quality which might enable us to measure whether these values are being translated into practice. Some are easier to gauge than others. Those that are physical or task-orientated will be easier to define quantitatively than those which stress relationships. Some may be in apparent contradiction to one another; for example, supporting a cultural tradition which emphasises the docility of girls. Services are often viewed as compensatory, for instance targeted at particular groups because of poverty. The particular set of indicators used, and how they are developed, may vary according to whose perspective is emphasized. In different kinds of circumstances it may be appropriate to focus on or elaborate certain indicators rather than others. Therefore we present broad categories of standards or **quality indicators**, but we present them as **a series of open questions** rather than as a prescriptive format.

QUALITY INDICATORS

1 QUALITY – ACCESSIBILITY AND USABILITY

How easy is it for a child to gain access to a particular service? What kinds of admissions processes are involved? What priorities are imposed? Who controls admissions? Are appeals possible against decisions which have been made?

Does the parent have problems about affordability of the service, or transport from home to the service? Is negotiation possible about hours attended, or about days attended? How flexible or rigid is the system of provision?

2 QUALITY – ENVIRONMENT

Are the surroundings inside and outside safe? Do they promote health and guard against obvious hazards and dangers? Is there access for children or adults with disabilities?

Are the surroundings attractive and well-designed? Do they offer varied opportunities for inside and outside play, exercise and rest? Are the rooms light, airy and warm? Are they sufficiently spacious to allow free movement but sufficiently cosy for quiet activities and relaxation? Are the kitchen facilities good? Are the children well nourished and enabled and encouraged to enjoy and appreciate mealtimes?

3 QUALITY – LEARNING ACTIVITIES

Is there a comprehensive range of activities for the children? Is the nursery or childcare setting well-equipped with a range of furnishings and activities which promote learning? Are children encouraged to develop linguistically and mathematically and to express themselves artistically or musically? Are they encouraged to take an interest in the world around them? Are they helped to learn to use their bodies fully? (NB: This is an

area of quality which has been substantially developed within education services. We attach notes in Appendix 1 which discuss some of the concepts in more detail.)

4 QUALITY – RELATIONSHIPS

Do staff have understanding and experience of child development? Do they interact with children with warmth and kindness, consistency and constancy? Do individual members of staff develop relationships with particular children and know and understand their personal histories? How do staff treat children who behave irritably or irritatingly or who are withdrawn? Do staff respond to the demands, enquiries and requests of children promptly and with respect? Do staff cope well with special events or emergencies?

Do the staff actively promote learning? Do they emphasise and develop cooperative play and support relationships and friendships between children? Are brothers and sisters allowed to be companions? Are relationships between adults and children, and between children, stable?

5 QUALITY – PARENTS’ VIEWS

Are there ways of measuring parents’ opinions or views about the childcare setting? Do parents feel welcome? Do parents feel they have enough information about the progress of their child? Are parents able to give information about the progress of their child? Are parents informed about the daily activities and routines and the reasons for them? Can parents comment on or contribute to these activities and routines? Can parents stay or join in mealtimes or some other activity of the nursery?

Do fathers as well as mothers feel welcome? Can other relatives besides mothers and fathers have access to the childcare setting?

6 QUALITY – THE COMMUNITY

Is the nursery or childcare setting part of its local community? Do any of the staff live locally? Are the interests and priorities of the local environment reflected in daily activities? Do children visit local facilities? Do local people who are not parents and staff have an opportunity to visit the nursery or childcare setting? Are there other activities which go on in the place where the children are being cared for and educated? Can the children take part in community events or festivals?

7 QUALITY – VALUING DIVERSITY

How do staff and children deal with race, gender and disability? How sensitive and tolerant are staff and children to individual differences? Is there a conscious attempt to understand and challenge stereotypes, and to represent and allow for cultural and physical diversity in the materials and equipment which are used in daily activities? Are extra resources and support available if necessary?

8 QUALITY – ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN AND OUTCOME MEASURES

Are children regularly observed? Is the progress and development of individual children monitored, recorded and discussed? Are the records available to parents? Are parents’ observations and comments used in the assessment? Is specialist help available when necessary, either for specific medical or psychological problems or for enabling the development of particular skills such as music or art or swimming?

9 QUALITY – COST BENEFITS

How are the costs of the nursery or childcare setting calculated? Once capital costs are met, are calculations made for rent, rates, insurance, heating and lighting? For janitation, domestic, administrative and maintenance costs? For salaries of those looking after children? Do costs include adequate resources and replacement

of consumable items? Is there regular cover for staff illness or staff training? Is staff recruitment included? Is the food budget adequate for a balanced and varied diet? Are costs included for visits and travel of staff and children? Who meets these costs? Do parents contribute? Are some staff unpaid because they are working as volunteers? Who pays for specialist input? Are these costs examined in relation to satisfaction of users? To absentee rates and turnover of staff? To turnover of children? To outcome measures for children?

10 QUALITY - ETHOS

The ethos and regime of the nursery or childcare setting is the balance and sum of all these quality indicators. The more positive and coherent the programme or organisation the more likely good quality will be achieved.

Does the nursery or childcare setting have a statement of aims and objectives? Do all the staff agree with and support these objectives? Are there clear strategies for putting these aims and objectives into practice? Does the organisation, routine and programme of activities reflect the aims, objectives and strategies?

Are there factors which work against achieving these aims and objectives? Is the setting excessively hierarchical? Do the staff working with the children enjoy their work, feel pleased and confident in it? Or do they follow instructions they are given without fully understanding or discussing them?

How accountable is the nursery or childcare setting, and to whom? What are the criteria?

How the ethos of the nursery or childcare setting is developed and maintained is a question for the local authority and the government. This question is addressed below in Paper Two.

■ PAPER TWO

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN PRESCHOOL SERVICES: the role of the state and the role of local government

In most countries there is a split of responsibility for different parts of the service: at national and local level; between under threes and over threes; between health or social work, and education. Often these different services have different aims and objectives, and different assumptions about the quality of the service which they are operating. We have attempted to address some of the issues concerning quality of services in the first paper. In this paper we address the issue of quality assurance – **what needs to be done at a local and national level to ensure that services meet the quality indicators which are set.**

The competencies of powers of local government are set by the state. In most European countries there is a three tier system: the state, the region, and the city or commune. The powers and service provision of these different tiers may overlap or be in conflict. Some regions may be semi-autonomous, with legislative and revenue raising powers, and in opposition or unresponsive to enlightened government policies on pre-school services. Alternatively, a region may develop its own pre-school policies in the face of government inaction. For example, in Northern Italy, both regions and communes have achieved very high standards of services, but since there is no firm government policy, regions and communes in the south of Italy for a variety of reasons, have relatively poor services. In other countries, such as France, there is a centralized system, and access to services, at least for children over two, is at similar levels throughout the country, although new legislation and powers of financing are being granted at commune level to support developments. In Britain central government is restrictive, both in the policy directives which it has set which endorse the contribution of private sector, and in the controls it imposes on the revenue raising powers of local authorities. Individual local authorities in Britain now have little discretion or incentive to develop services.

Even given such variation between services and across services, it is a fundamental assumption of this paper that **all** children should have **equal** access to **affordable** pre-school provision which is of a consistent **quality**.

If equality of access to quality services is a broad goal, how do local government and national government contribute? Although we believe that these different levels of government have a major contribution to make, it should be acknowledged that this view is not universally shared. Some believe that the governmental role should be minimal, leaving issues of supply and quality to ‘free market’ forces. This view has found favour with the British Government in its response to the growing need for more childcare services as more women enter the labour market.

The degree to which the private and voluntary sector is acknowledged in and covered by legislation varies considerably. In Britain, in particular, there is now an emphasis on parental choice in the private sector, and regulation of that sector is defined in the recent Children Act. As in America, it is increasingly being proposed that the only local authority contribution required is through inspection of private and voluntary facilities. In addition voluntary accreditation systems of qualification for staff working in private and voluntary provision are being developed using American models. Such accreditation aims to ensure a minimum standard, but relies on voluntary participation of staff to become accredited. The accreditation systems assume a low level of staff competence. However, the legislation in Britain is presently too weak for local authorities to exert any sanctions if provision is substandard, whether or not staff are accredited.

Such a free market model assumes well-informed parents who are able to shop around and purchase a ‘best buy’. There have been a number of attempts using American models to provide ‘information and refer-

ral systems', that is a kind of childcare information shop where parents or employers can find out about the services available in their locality. But even if parents are well informed, there are various constraints on their attempts to play the market. Good provision may not be locally available; there may be problems of finance or mobility.

We have therefore concluded that the free market model is a crude and dogmatic model for achieving quality. It does not address present problems of fragmentation of standards or distribution of resources. It assumes that more choice is necessarily better choice, however limited the options which are available. It provides only minimum standards for quality and provides no mediating means to help services which want to improve or maintain quality. Even in Britain, where the idea of private provision has more currency than elsewhere, there is a growing recognition that there needs to be a private/public partnership in infrastructure – training, building design, and so on.

We have assumed that if it is a fundamental principle of pre-school services that all children should have **equal** access to **good quality** childcare, then the role of local and national government is crucial, and the free market cannot deliver. The government at the local and national level has an overview of the demand for services, of the need to redistribute resources between richer and poorer areas, and therefore exercises a key role in planning and in developing a coherent pattern of services to meet local circumstances, whether these be primarily urban or primarily rural.

Leaving aside the free market model for pre-school services which has little support in Europe outside Britain, one of the main issues to be addressed in achieving equality of access is the fragmentation of services. Spain, where the proposal is to transfer all responsibility for services to education at each level, is an exception to the generally fragmented pattern of services; so are Denmark and Sweden which have adopted an integrated approach within a social welfare framework. In New Zealand all services have recently been transferred to education, but the emphasis is on partnership with the private and voluntary sector. Strathclyde Region in Scotland also has all services located within education. Generally the more integrated the system, the more coherent the planning for under fives.

The Swedish and New Zealand models also stress the importance of both theoretical and practical developments at local and national levels. In these countries, research and development are seen as integral to the provision of services.

State responsibility does not necessarily imply direct state provision. The New Zealand model is of particular interest because it has chosen to subsidize private or voluntary provision, but in a very rigorous way. The government agency agrees on a contract with a voluntary or private organisation. The requirements of the contract are tightly specified, and the contract is for a two year period. The organisation must have signed parental support for its proposals. If the organisation meets the necessary conditions, then the government will guarantee substantial subsidy for the period of the contract. In those Member States where there is already substantial voluntary sector provision this may be a useful model, although it is a model which is highly dependent on the consistency of government policy.

There is therefore a range of views about the role of the government at local and national level in the provision of pre-school services, which at one extreme denies all but minimal functions and responsibilities, and at the other, assumes considerable responsibilities. This paper assumes that equality of access and quality of provision can only be satisfactorily provided where the government at local and national level does assume a major responsibility in developing and maintaining services. The most successful and far-reaching quality assurance occurs when the government supports, endorses and encourages local government initiatives. The role of government at local and national level is examined in this light.

THE ROLE OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

1 QUALITY ASSURANCE – COORDINATION AND COHERENCE

The government sets the parameters for services to pre-fives. Typically responsibility for pre-school services is carried by several government departments, for instance health, and education. Other government departments may also carry complementary responsibilities, for instance employment or environment or finance (eg taxation and income maintenance). A coherent policy for pre-school services is one which achieves maximum coherence for all services for young children, which may affect them directly or indirectly, and ensures redistribution of resources where appropriate.

Recommendation: The government should have a coherent approach to pre-school services.

2 QUALITY ASSURANCE - POLICY

The government sets the focus for services for young children. Public and published statements of intent affirming the importance and direction of pre-school services enable democratic debate and discussion to take place in political, professional and consumer forums. The debate would in turn lead to further elaborations of policy, and inform legislative and fiscal decisions.

Recommendation: The government should have clear policy statements on its intentions in developing and maintaining pre-school services.

3 QUALITY ASSURANCE - LEGISLATION

The legislation needs to outline the competencies of local government in providing pre-school services; to authorize expenditure plans for the development of services and set minimum requirements and targets at national and local levels; to set standards for the private and voluntary sector with appropriate sanctions if they are not met; to set targets and specify course requirements for training of pre-school staff; to authorize a research and development programme.

Recommendation: The government should provide a legislative framework for pre-school services which reflects the policy directives.

4 QUALITY ASSURANCE – EXPENDITURE AND RESOURCES

Quality pre-school services require investment, particularly for services to children under three, where the majority of providers are currently in the private and voluntary sector. The investment should be both capital and revenue investment in the direct provision of services, but also in the infrastructure of services; support services, training, research, and service development for target groups such as children with disabilities. The investment should also be redistributive; ensuring the development of services in low income areas, and where there are currently few services.

Recommendation: The government should invest substantially in services.

5 QUALITY ASSURANCE – PLANNING AND MONITORING

A wide range of information and statistics is necessary to develop coherent and integrated services at local and national level. The data gathered should include such measures as demographic demand; attendance patterns of different age groups; progress of target groups such as children with disabilities; development plans from local authorities. This information also serves to monitor the effectiveness of policies. Research and development projects would also serve to give insights to and monitor the effectiveness of policies.

Sophisticated planning implies delegated personnel whose function is to coordinate the various strands of information, to monitor and report or audit the quality of the services.

Recommendation: The government should ensure adequate planning and monitoring of services.

6 QUALITY ASSURANCE - TRAINING

The government needs to plan for numbers of staff and make recommendations on the types of qualifying and post-qualifying courses, in line with developments for an integrated service for children of 0-6.

Recommendation: The government should oversee training requirements for staff working in pre-school services.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

1 QUALITY ASSURANCE – COORDINATION AND COHERENCE

The problems of coordination and coherence across departments is further complicated at local levels by a split of responsibility between region and commune, city or district level. Responsibilities need to be clearly demarcated between these levels. The coherence and coordination of services should also take account of differences between richer and poorer areas, and between urban and rural, and be sufficiently flexible to allow for the different demands or requirements in different areas.

Recommendation: Services should be coordinated and coherent at local levels.

2 QUALITY ASSURANCE – POLICY

At a local level, the region or the commune has the job of drawing up statements of aims and objectives within the framework laid down by national government, and developing processes for discussing, refining and developing them within a variety of forums; professional, trade union, political and public. The policy statements are living statements of intent; they set the scene for more detailed work on quality indicators, and other service developments.

Recommendation: There should be clear statements of policy on the aims, objectives and levels of pre-school services.

3 QUALITY ASSURANCE – DEVELOPMENT PLANS

At a local level, the responsible authorities need to provide a coherent model of development, legislatively agreed where appropriate by the region, with specified targets according to local priorities, and within agreed time scales. In no Member State does supply match demand, and demands themselves are not constant. Therefore the process of drawing up and revising development plans is not a finite one. Nor is it a purely professional one. The targets and the strategies for achieving them need to be discussed at a variety of levels; with staff working with children; with parents; with professional organisations; with trade unions; and with politicians. The development strategy might also include action research projects.

Recommendation: There should be development plans at local level which set targets and time scales.

4 QUALITY ASSURANCE – EXPENDITURE AND RESOURCES

Local government needs to resource services and developments, to make sure that individual institutions, whether in the state or private and voluntary sector, meet quality requirements for children. This may involve direct resourcing for staffing, buildings, equipment, etc; or indirect resourcing through grants and subsidies;

or helping to attract funds from business and outside agencies to sponsor developments.
Recommendation: Local services should be adequately resourced to maintain quality.

5 QUALITY ASSURANCE – PLANNING AND MONITORING

Local government has a role to assess demand. It should also ensure that the quality of children's experience in pre-school services is maintained, whether in the private and voluntary or in the state sector. Basic monitoring data about demographic demand, attendance and absence rates of staff and children, etc., is essential. But there is a debate about how quality through monitoring might be assessed; which quality indicators are promoted under what circumstances, whether to rely on the opinions of professionals or parents; whether to use measures of child outcome particularly in the case of target groups of children; or whether to rely on the basic quantitative planning data regularly obtained. The role of the local authority is to balance and if possible integrate and reconcile these different points of view.

Recommendation: Local government should be responsible for planning and monitoring pre-school services.

6 QUALITY ASSURANCE – ADVICE AND SUPPORT

If monitoring indicates bad practice, how can this be changed? Apart from the ultimate sanctions of dismissal of staff, and/or closure of the premises, changes have to be brought about by support, advice and training. However, the function of such support and advice is also to enhance, encourage and promote the good practice which has been identified, to develop and discuss new ways of working. These support and advisory services could also be offered to the private and voluntary sector. A range of support services and a substantial programme of in-service training developed with the active participation of staff and parents is an essential background to maintaining high quality services, and managing change.

Recommendation: Local government should have a support and advisory role in maintaining and promoting quality services.

7 QUALITY ASSURANCE – STAFFING

The staff represent the single most important factor in establishing quality services. Staff who enjoy and feel confidence in their work, who are warm and caring towards children, and who provide a stimulating environment for them, ensure quality. Therefore the pay and conditions of service, the ratios of staff to children, the recruitment, selection, induction, support, supervision and promotion of staff are key areas for maintaining standards.

Within the private and voluntary sector these staffing issues are typically dealt with at a service level, within the nursery or childcare setting. Within public services they are frequently dealt with at an administrative level outside the nursery or childcare setting. In both cases there needs to be a balance, a mechanism for ensuring those working in or using the nursery or service, as well as administrators, combine perspectives in dealing with staffing issues. (NB: These issues are being addressed in a separate EC seminar.)

Recommendation: Local government should take a key role in staffing services.

8 QUALITY ASSURANCE – RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

At a local level, the detail of quality indicators, and monitoring and evaluation systems, needs to be developed. In addition, it may be useful to focus on the development of particular aspects of the service, through liaison with local research institutions. Research is traditionally a rigorous examination of specific contexts or events. It can also be seen in a broader context, of encouraging and supporting staff and parents to sys-

tematically explore aspects of practice in their own nurseries or childcare settings which are problematic or warrant further development; for example bilingualism; or the use of the art of puppetry as a means of expression.

Recommendation: Local government should have a research and development role.

SUMMARY

The functions of government at national and local level are closely connected and complementary in maintaining high quality services for pre-school children. These functions have been listed with recommendations.

The extent to which the European Commission should endorse and carry forward the discussion about quality indicators, and the recommendations about action at local and national government levels are dealt with in the last session of the seminar.