

# Improving Quality in the Early Years:

## A Comparison of Perspectives and Measures



FULL RESEARCH BRIEF:

**Summary and overview of findings,  
conclusions and recommendations**

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### Introduction

The quality of early education and care matters, not only because it affects the everyday experiences of children but because the benefits are only realised if the provision used is high quality (Peisner-Feinberg and Burchinal, 1997; NICHD, 2000; Sylva et al, 2008). To achieve this, effective tools are needed to help different stakeholder groups identify high quality provision, and support them in improving it:

- ▶ Parents need tools to help them to select high quality providers for their children, and drive quality improvement through market forces;
- ▶ Providers need effective tools to identify their own strengths and possible areas for development, in order to improve the quality of provision offered to children;
- ▶ Local authorities need to be able to prioritise funding, support and training using evidence-based decisions, and to encourage providers in quality improvement; and
- ▶ Policy-makers in central government need to be able to identify where investment is needed to improve outcomes for young children.

A number of measures exist for assessing quality, many of them validated by research as capturing elements of quality which are predictive of improved child outcomes (e.g. Sylva et al, 2004; Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2005; Pianta, La Paro and Hamre, 2007). However, the fact that a measure captures quality effectively

does not guarantee that it will be a practical and usable tool for quality improvement. Likewise, tools which are accessible and easy to use may not necessarily have been validated by research. This study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, set out to consider some of these issues and explore three well-known measures used in England for identifying the quality of centre-based early years settings:

- ▶ The inspection reports of the regulatory body Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills);
- ▶ The Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-R, ECERS-E and ITERS-R); and
- ▶ Quality assurance schemes.

Our starting point for considering these different measures was that each stakeholder group should have access to tools which:

- ▶ capture elements of quality shown to be predictive of children's outcomes;
- ▶ reflect a definition of quality which they value and recognise; and
- ▶ are accessible and usable.

This study focused on the first three stakeholder groups (parents, providers and local authorities) but is also intended to inform and guide policy-makers at national level. Where we refer to parents, providers and local authority staff, we are referring to those who took part in this study. A short overview of the research methodology is given at the end of this document.

## Key findings (1): How do the different stakeholders perceive quality in early years education and care?

- ▶ Stakeholders primarily valued what we might call 'process quality', defined as 'actual experiences that occur in [early years settings] including children's interaction with caregivers and peers and their participation in different activities' (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000):
  - The quality of the staff team was seen as the most important factor in determining quality of provision. Stakeholders agreed that practitioners need to be able to meet children's social, emotional and developmental needs, and have a good understanding of child development.
  - All three stakeholder groups recognised the importance of engaging with parents, and involving them as partners in their children's learning.
- ▶ In relation to the more structural aspects of provision, differences between the three stakeholder groups were more evident, with their emphasis varying according to specific priorities, roles and knowledge:
  - Providers and local authorities, with their deeper understanding of the aspects which lead to high quality provision, were more likely to mention dimensions such as training and qualifications, and the importance of leadership and management.
  - Parents were more likely than providers to list structural aspects such as health, safety and supervision as essential components of quality.
- ▶ In many cases, stakeholders differed less in their concepts of quality than in the ways in which these were articulated. Different understandings were particularly evident in the use of the word 'education' as it relates to early years, with parents tending to equate this with a rigid and 'school-like' approach.





### Key findings (2): To what extent do the concepts of quality embodied in the measures considered here align with stakeholder perceptions of quality?

- ▶ Our research focused primarily on Ofsted and ECERS/ITERS. Both these approaches consider the extent to which settings provide for children's social, emotional and cognitive needs, and therefore align strongly with stakeholder perceptions of quality. Both also cover 'structural' aspects of provision such as the quality of the physical environment, and the extent to which providers meet basic welfare requirements such as health, safety and supervision.
- ▶ The key differences between the two approaches, and their alignment with stakeholder perceptions of quality, relate to their differing purposes. Neither tool completely fulfilled all the requirements set out by stakeholders for identifying quality; rather, they were complementary:
  - While ECERS and ITERS have a more explicit focus on the observation of 'process quality', valued highly by all stakeholders, Ofsted inspectors cover a broader range of dimensions and therefore spend less time directly observing practice. Stakeholders agreed that Ofsted inspections could not fully capture the depth of information needed to reflect all elements of quality they valued, particularly complex aspects such as staff-child interactions.
  - However the broader focus of Ofsted encompasses setting-level dimensions valued by providers and local authority staff but not covered by ECERS/ITERS (e.g. the effectiveness of leadership, management and self-evaluation).
  - Parents valued the ability of providers to help their children progress and achieve 'key milestones'. While Ofsted has an explicit focus on children's outcomes, ECERS and ITERS consider the extent to which settings provide effectively for children, assessing key aspects shown by research to lead to improved child outcomes.
- ▶ Our findings highlight the limitations of any evaluation completed at one time-point (whether Ofsted, or an external ECERS/ITERS audit) in providing a rich and complete picture of quality. Providers and local authorities said this required regular observations, and consultation with professionals who have worked with a setting over a period of time (e.g. local authority advisers).
- ▶ Quality assurance schemes reflected both of these features: schemes tend to work on a more continuous basis, and generally provide the support of a mentor (e.g. local authority adviser) who works with the setting over time. Local authorities and providers were positive about the coverage of the schemes they used, saying that they enabled them to look at everyday practices, but also to focus on the effectiveness of leadership and the individual needs of the staff team.

### Key findings (3): What are the statistical associations between the grades awarded by Ofsted in EYFS inspection reports, scores on the ECERS and ITERS, and participation in quality assurance schemes?

- ▶ There was broad alignment between the grades awarded by Ofsted at the setting level and quality for pre-school children as measured by the ECERS-R and E:
  - Correlations between ECERS scores and Ofsted grades were statistically significant, suggesting they are 'pulling in the same direction' and to some extent assess the same quality constructs.
  - Analysis of the ways in which Ofsted and ECERS categorise settings as low or high quality also showed alignment between the two approaches, particularly towards the higher end of the quality spectrum. A setting achieving a high score on one measure (e.g. an outstanding Ofsted grade) was generally likely to receive a higher grade on the other.
- ▶ However, there was also a large degree of 'non-overlap' between the two measures:
  - Although statistically significant, associations between ECERS-R and E scores and Ofsted grades were generally small. While to some extent the two measure the same thing, they are largely assessing different constructs. This is not entirely surprising, given the differences in scope and purpose.
  - In terms of categorisation, there was less agreement at the lower end of the quality continuum. For example, settings graded as inadequate by Ofsted did not necessarily receive the lowest ECERS scores. This is likely to be related to the purpose of Ofsted's inadequate grading. While a low score on ECERS reflects a widespread inability to meet children's needs for a high quality environment, an inadequate judgement can be awarded by Ofsted to a setting which is otherwise 'good' but which has not complied with the regulatory standards in one or more aspects.
- ▶ In contrast to the findings for pre-school children, there were no significant associations between the grades awarded by Ofsted and quality for infants and toddlers. A setting graded as good or outstanding by Ofsted would not necessarily be rated as providing good quality for babies and toddlers by the ITERS-R scale.
- ▶ There was little variation in the different sub-grades awarded by Ofsted within EYFS inspection reports:
  - 45 per cent of reports in our sample had the same grade for all sub-judgements; a further 26 per cent had only one or two grades different to the majority. This suggests that the different grades awarded by Ofsted may not provide useful information about a setting's varying strengths and weaknesses.
  - The grades one might expect to be more closely associated with quality as assessed by the ECERS-R and E (e.g. 'provision quality') showed only marginally stronger associations with ECERS scores than other grades (e.g. 'leadership and management').
- ▶ Settings participating in quality assurance (particularly a local authority scheme) achieved higher scores on the ECERS-R and E, suggesting that they were more skilled at providing an appropriate and challenging learning environment. They were also graded more highly by Ofsted on a number of aspects, including leadership and management, self-evaluation and capacity for continuous improvement.
- ▶ The majority of associations between ECERS and Ofsted were stronger for inspections carried out following the introduction of the EYFS framework in September 2008, than for pre-EYFS inspections. This may reflect an increased focus within current inspections, built around the EYFS framework, on the provision of an 'enabling learning environment' for children. Pre-EYFS inspections reports assessed compliance with the more basic National Standards (DfES, 2003).

### Key findings (4): How effectively do the three approaches considered here support stakeholders in identifying and improving quality?

#### Parents

- ▶ Where parents had a choice of settings which met their practical needs, quality was the primary driver in their decision in choosing provision for their child.
- ▶ Parents' own visits to settings and word of mouth were the most important means of making choices about provider quality.
- ▶ Ofsted reports were the only external measure used by the majority of parents who took part in the focus groups. Most were aware of Ofsted reports, and some had used them as part of their decision-making process.
- ▶ Of those who used Ofsted reports, most did so in order to identify settings which did not fulfil the basic requirements (i.e. they would not visit a setting with a low grade if they had alternatives).
- ▶ Some parents found Ofsted reports valuable as a reference. Many liked the 'Record of Inspection Judgements' which summarises all the sub-grades awarded, and used this to decide whether to look any further into the report. Parents were also positive about the coverage of the EYFS, on which Ofsted evaluation schedules are based.
- ▶ However, the majority of parents felt that Ofsted reports did not provide all the information they needed to make a decision about a setting, or include all the key aspects of quality which they valued (e.g. adult-child interactions):
  - Many viewed them as relating to 'education', which they did not feel was of importance to them, suggesting a misconception among parents as to the information Ofsted reports can provide.
  - Many also reported difficulties in finding and understanding the information they wanted within the reports. Parents had a number of suggestions for making reports more parent-friendly, including clearer directions or hyperlinks in the 'summary judgements' table pointing to further detail in the main report; explanations of key terms; and a summary of parent views.
- ▶ Providers reported a number of other methods for communicating quality to parents, including displaying their quality assurance award and via their website.
- ▶ Parents expressed a desire for further support in identifying high quality provision. Findings suggest this may be particularly important when choosing a setting for the first time. While parents currently using settings had a good understanding of different quality dimensions, the range of criteria they reported using when initially choosing a provider was narrower.

## Providers and local authorities

- ▶ Providers and local authority staff acknowledged that being awarded a poor grade by Ofsted, or believing they were 'due' an inspection, could encourage settings to make improvements and to engage with the local authority for support.
- ▶ However, the Ofsted inspection cycle of three to four years was seen as a limiting factor, resulting in long periods without the motivating effect of being inspected and/or potentially receiving a new grade.
- ▶ The second limiting factor noted by local authority staff was the tendency for providers to view Ofsted as the 'gold standard', with settings achieving a good or outstanding grade feeling that they had no further improvements to make. This was seen as a particular problem where the authority considered there were still improvements to be made (i.e. they did not fully agree with the Ofsted grade).
- ▶ Local authorities who used a range of indicators to determine funding (e.g. engagement with ECERS) said that this encouraged providers to use a wider variety of schemes, rather than focusing on the Ofsted grade. Tools included ECERS/ITERS, local authority quality assurance and other internal tools, and national materials such as the Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme (EYQISP).
- ▶ Local authorities were generally positive about the use of ECERS and ITERS as tools to identify quality, both for the purpose of directing funding and support according to need, and to support providers in quality improvement.
- ▶ Providers found the ECERS and ITERS to be transparent, helpful in identifying areas which could be improved, and capable of providing a richer picture than Ofsted inspections. However, the inflexible nature of the systematic ECERS/ITERS approach meant they did not always take account of a setting's constraints, in contrast to Ofsted's more flexible approach to gathering evidence.
- ▶ Providers were significantly more positive about the use of ECERS and ITERS as self-evaluation tools than as audit tools. When used for external audit, ECERS and ITERS could be subject to the same disadvantages as Ofsted, providing a view of quality at a single time-point, and open to some providers 'performing' on the day rather than planning long-term improvements.
- ▶ Providers used a range of self-evaluation tools, including the Ofsted Self-Evaluation Form (SEF), ECERS and ITERS and others. The importance of a continuous commitment to quality improvement was a consistent theme within the focus groups, as was the value of self-evaluation and the setting's involvement in the process. Providers were positive about the use of quality assurance schemes, which they felt gave them ownership and encouraged ongoing self-reflection.
- ▶ Setting managers and local authority staff emphasised the importance of a supportive partnership between providers and the local authority. Providers also expressed a desire for additional support in improving quality.

## Discussion and conclusions

To conclude, we return to our three 'desired characteristics' of quality measures to ask whether the measures explored as part of the study ....

### **...capture a definition of quality which is recognised by all stakeholders?**

To meet the needs of all stakeholders, quality measures need to capture the more complex elements of 'process quality' (e.g. interactions between staff and children) as well as the structural characteristics (e.g. ratios and qualifications) which underpin them. They also need to reflect over-arching aspects such as leadership and management, and the extent to which settings are committed to quality improvement. No single measure reflected all the aspects of quality valued by stakeholders, with each of the tools assessed as part of this research meeting different needs according to their purpose. Thus, a broad range of tools is needed to reflect multiple perspectives. As well as considering the range of dimensions assessed, stakeholders also highlighted the importance of capturing a rich and deep view of quality. In order to achieve this, external tools, particularly those completed at a single time-point, may need to be supplemented with measures which reflect practice over time, drawing on the views of professionals who know the setting well (e.g. local authority advisers).

### **...capture elements which are predictive of positive outcomes for children?**

One cannot assume that ECERS and ITES are perfect tools which capture all the important elements of quality. However, they have been shown through many research studies to be associated with children's outcomes; that is, children who attend settings which score higher on ECERS or ITES do better than children who attend lower quality settings (e.g. Burchinal et al, 1996; Sylva et al, 2010). In contrast, a study by Hopkin et al (2010) found that Ofsted scores for early years settings did not predict children's later outcomes. Given this, the findings of the quantitative analysis that Ofsted grades do not

necessarily capture the same dimensions of quality as the ECERS and ITES are important. The fact that a setting has been awarded a high grade by Ofsted does not guarantee that children are experiencing high quality provision (as assessed by the ECERS and ITES), particularly for children under the age of 30 months. This does not mean that Ofsted is not fulfilling its regulatory purpose; ECERS and Ofsted are different tools, intended to do different things. However, it does show that Ofsted grades, even those awarded for 'provision quality', do not provide a full picture of the quality of settings. Ofsted grades should not necessarily be relied upon as a complete and accurate measure of the quality of practice.

The third approach considered as part of our research was the use of quality assurance schemes. The findings indicate that such schemes provide an additional means of supplementing the information provided by Ofsted and ECERS/ITES; settings which participated in quality assurance schemes achieved higher scores on the ECERS-R and E, and were also rated more highly by Ofsted.

### **...are usable by, and accessible to, all stakeholders for quality improvement?**

Turning now to quality improvement at the setting level, responsibility for developing practice rests largely with the providers themselves, with local authority support and guidance. Local authorities also play a role through commissioning, and in identifying and funding settings to provide early education places. In order to drive improvement, providers and local authorities therefore need effective tools to help them evaluate and develop quality. Equally, if parents are to make informed choices about choosing high quality provision, they need accurate and accessible information to support their choice.

Regulation plays a role in ensuring certain standards are met, and in providing public accountability and an external assessment on which to base decisions around commissioning



(for local authorities) and childcare choice (for parents). In fact, Ofsted reports are often the only external measure accessible to parents to support their childcare choices (NAO, 2012). Although reports do contain information on the aspects of quality valued by parents in our study, the parents themselves often did not recognise this. Therefore, if parents are to make effective use of Ofsted reports to select high quality provision for their children, they will need support in understanding the role of Ofsted (i.e., in recognising that reports do hold information of value to them), and the reports themselves need to be made more transparent and clearer to parents.

The quantitative findings also indicate a need for the different sub-grades awarded within Ofsted reports to provide more meaningful information to allow parents, providers and local authorities to discriminate between aspects of high and low quality. This is important because, although the reports themselves provide detail on strengths and weaknesses of provision, parents reported using the grades as a 'gateway' to Ofsted reports, helping them to decide whether they should look further; and local authorities reported that the grades were one of the prime motivators for settings in responding to their inspection.

In addition to enhancing the usability of the information provided by Ofsted, our findings strongly indicate a need to supplement the regulatory process with additional measures to provide a broader and deeper picture of quality, and warn against over-reliance on what is by nature a relatively blunt instrument. Our research reflects the limitations on the extent to which a regulatory system, with infrequent inspections and limited capacity for detailed feedback and support, can provide all the information needed by different stakeholders, inspire settings to improve quality, or meet their needs for quality improvement.

Providers and local authority staff reported using a range of other tools to support commissioning decisions, direct funding and support, and guide quality improvement; they also highlighted the importance of capturing quality over time, providers' ownership of the process, and a continuous approach to quality improvement. If the picture of quality provided through regulation is by necessity a narrow one, then as well as using supplementary tools, it may also be important to

reduce the perceived importance of the Ofsted grade as the 'primary measure' among providers. This is important because of the tendency reported by local authority staff for providers awarded a 'good' or 'outstanding' grade by Ofsted to feel they have no need for further improvement.

Given that parents do not currently have access to other measures to help them identify high quality providers, our research also prompts reflection as to whether this should be addressed. The focus group findings suggest that parents both want and need additional support, especially when choosing a setting for the first time. Local authorities might therefore consider whether aspects of the information they hold on settings could be shared with parents. However, our research also shows that different stakeholder groups, although similar in their concepts of quality, also had different priorities and understandings. It may not be appropriate for all information to be shared with parents. For example, some of it may be commercially sensitive and may therefore jeopardise the relationship between local authorities and providers if released. In addition, some information (e.g. ECERS or ITERS score-sheets) may not always be easily understood by parents. However, we do believe that local authorities could consider which aspects of the information they hold on settings could be shared with parents, for example, engagement in quality assurance schemes, or other indicators used to determine funding.

Finally, the focus group findings highlight the need for providers to be guided in their quality improvement efforts, and emphasise the importance of supportive partnerships between local authorities and providers. It may be that one of the reasons that settings taking part in local authority quality assurance schemes scored more highly on the ECERS-R and E than settings taking part in other schemes lies in the support which accompanies them. The fact that providers also expressed a desire for more guidance is particularly pertinent, in light of the fact that many local authority respondents felt funding cuts were already having an impact on their ability to provide ongoing support.

## Recommendations for policy and practice

### In relation to local authorities and providers, we suggest that:

- ▶ Decisions around quality, particularly those relating to funding and commissioning, are made using a broad range of quality indicators. We would caution against decisions being made on the basis of Ofsted grades alone. The recent Government consultation on the statutory guidance for delivery of early education for two, three and four year olds (DfE, 2011) suggests that, for settings graded as 'satisfactory' by Ofsted, local authorities should use a range of quality criteria to assess whether providers should be eligible for funding. We would endorse this approach but suggest that decisions for all providers (including those graded as good or outstanding by Ofsted) should be made using information supplementary to the Ofsted grade.
- ▶ Where possible, decisions around quality should encompass assessments made over time rather than on the basis of a single 'snapshot'. The knowledge of professionals who have supported settings over time can make an important contribution to assessing and improving quality, but this needs to be balanced against the need for commissioning decisions and quality measures to be transparent to both providers and parents.
- ▶ Local authorities are supported by central government in their use of additional quality measures and tools, through adequate funding and relevant policy/ statutory guidance. Measures might include quality assurance (particularly local authority schemes), ECERS and ITERS, and the wide range of other measures currently used to supplement regulatory assessments.
- ▶ Providers are supported by local authorities and provider representative bodies in using a broad range of quality improvement tools to supplement regulatory Ofsted inspections. Alongside this, efforts are required to ensure providers understand that Ofsted grades do not give a full and complete picture of quality.
- ▶ When designing and implementing quality improvement tools and support programmes, local authorities try to ensure that providers feel ownership of the process.

### In relation to supporting parents in choosing high quality childcare, we suggest that:

- ▶ Parents are provided with additional guidance to help them to understand key aspects of early years practice, support them in knowing what to look for when visiting settings, and understand the role and remit of Ofsted. One of the key outputs of this study will be a practical guide for parents on how to identify high quality childcare. Other guidance might be provided by Ofsted itself, or by local authorities through their Family Information Service.
- ▶ If Ofsted reports are to provide a means of guiding parental choice, Ofsted should review the language and structure of reports to assess how they could be made more transparent and accessible to parents.
- ▶ Efforts are made to ensure parents have access to other means of identifying high quality providers. Based on the findings of this study, we endorse the suggestions by the National Audit Office (NAO, 2012), and the recent Government consultation on the statutory guidance for the delivery of early education (DfE, 2011), that some of the information on quality held by local authorities should be made more transparent to parents. However this should be balanced against considerations of the sensitivity of information, and how easily understood that information is likely to be for 'non-experts'. Appropriate indicators might include, for example, whether providers participate in quality assurance or other improvement schemes. Local authorities will also need to identify appropriate channels for providing this information, for example through their Family Information Service.

### We also recommend that:

- ▶ Ofsted considers the extent to which quality for children under 30 months is effectively evaluated via inspections, and reflected in Ofsted reports. Alongside this, we recommend use of tools by providers and local authorities which consider the quality provided for different age ranges of children.
- ▶ Ofsted reviews the way in which information on settings' strengths and weaknesses is provided via their reports. If sub-grades are used, we recommend these are reviewed to ensure that they discriminate effectively between strengths and weaknesses. If sub-grades are not used, we recommend that this information is provided in other ways. Whatever the means, we support the need for reports to offer a quick-access overview of the quality provided.

### Further research, particularly into the following areas:

- ▶ How best to capture and improve the quality of provision offered to children under the age of three years, particularly in light of the expansion of funded places for disadvantaged two year olds.
- ▶ The most effective means of making Ofsted and other quality information accessible and transparent to parents.
- ▶ The role played by local authorities in supporting quality improvement.

## Methodology

The University of Oxford and A+ Education Ltd. were responsible for the quantitative element of the study, which explored the statistical relationships between Ofsted grades, scores on the ECERS and ITERS, and participation in quality assurance schemes. The analysis was based on a large sample of private and voluntary settings which had been assessed using at least one of the Environment Rating Scales (ECERS-R, ECERS-E and/or ITERS-R) between 2007 and 2011, either as part of research carried out by the University of Oxford or as part of audits carried out by A+ Education on behalf of local authorities in England. Ofsted provided 'childcare on non-domestic premises' reports for inspections carried out in the sample settings between 2005 and 2011. Where available, two reports were selected for each setting; one from the period after the inspection framework was revised in line with the new Early Years Foundation Stage framework (i.e. September 2008 onwards) and one pre-EYFS. The sample comprised 1,094 settings with an EYFS inspection report and 1,256 settings with a pre-EYFS inspection report. Data were also available for a sub-sample of 249 settings on their participation in quality assurance schemes. Due to the way in which the sample was gathered, using pre-existing sources with settings selected according to the purpose of each project, it is not fully representative of all settings in England.

Daycare Trust conducted a short literature review and primary qualitative work with key stakeholders, which included:

- ▶ Eight focus groups with parents from a range of different backgrounds (across six different settings within two local authorities);
- ▶ Six focus groups with local authority staff, recruited via the UK ECERS Network and the National Quality Improvement Network (representing 21 local authorities in total);
- ▶ Two focus groups with setting managers, representing 21 settings in total across two local authorities (11 from the private sector, eight from the voluntary sector and two from the maintained sector).

### OTHER REPORTS WHICH MAY BE OF INTEREST:

- ▶ Mathers, S., Singler, R. and Karemaker, A. (2012). Improving Quality in the Early Years: A Comparison of Perspectives and Measures. Final Report. London: Daycare Trust and Oxford: University of Oxford
- ▶ Mathers, S. and Karemaker, A. (2012). Improving Quality in the Early Years: A Comparison of Perspectives and Measures: Quantitative Research Brief.
- ▶ Karemaker, A., Mathers, S. and Singler, R. (2012). Improving Quality in the Early Years: A Comparison of Perspectives and Measures. Technical Report. London: Daycare Trust and Oxford: University of Oxford.



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