

THE QUALITY OF CHILDCARE SERVICES – A COMPARATIVE VIEW

Introduction

There are different reasons for parents to decide to use childcare facilities. On the one hand it is important – especially for working parents – that childcare is affordable and accessible. On the other hand the quality of the service provided is also of significant importance.

The quality of childcare has to do with factors that contribute to the social, emotional and cognitive development of a child. This article focuses on the structural aspects of childcare, which can be measured and regulated by the government.¹ These aspects include, for example, the group size, the staff-child-ratio, the education of the childminders and safety regulations.

Although the debate on quality is evident in many countries, there is a severe lack of harmonised statistics on this matter. The simple fact that many countries have different care facilities with different quality measures and requirements makes comparisons difficult. It is therefore the purpose of this article to provide an overview of the available data (see Table).

Group size and staff-child ratio

In European countries there is a wide range in the group size of childcare facilities. For the 0-3-year-olds the size ranges from 10 to 14 children. For the older age group the size varies from 20 children, for example, in Austria or the Slovak Republic to 30 children in France. Childminders are usually responsible for a maximum of five children, e.g., in Austria. In Poland, the maximum group size is not yet regulated.

Staff-child-ratios seem to differ widely between European countries as well. This ratio ranges in the

youngest age class from 1:3 in Denmark or the UK to 1:9 in Norway. In the older age class the ratio varies from 1:6 in Denmark to 1:25 in Portugal. There are different developments of this ratio across countries. In Spain or Slovak Republic, for example, the ratio has been decreasing over the past years in comparison to Sweden, where the average group size has been growing over the past years.

To interpret these figures correctly it is important to recognize that they are based on legal regulations. There are, however, other factors that influence quality, i.e. the realization of the regulations, which are not always followed. In practice there may be “oversized” groups, especially during the first and final hours of the day. This can be a result of parents’ irregular working hours or childminders falling ill.

Educational level of child caretakers

A look at the childcare labour market within Europe reveals that most of the workforce is female. This market is also characterised by low wages (in public and private centres), often fixed-term contracts, a high turnover rate and, in some cases, different educational requirements. All these factors influence the quality of childcare negatively because steady, consistent and well-educated members of staff are important features of high-quality services.

A comparison of the required educational levels of child caretakers in European countries shows that these levels range from personal skills to university education. In some countries private childminders, working from home, have no educational requirements – only personal skills (e.g., Denmark, Germany, Portugal or Norway). Other countries, such as France, have tried to raise the educational standard of this group.

In almost all countries there are set and inspected requirements for crèches, nursery schools and pre-schools. But there are considerable differences across countries in relation to the required level. Countries such as the Czech Republic, Finland, Portugal, the Slovak Republic and Spain stipulate university degrees. In contrast, in Austria, Denmark or Ireland an education at the secondary level is necessary. The general trend, however is to increase the required levels.

¹ There are also process and conceptual aspects. Process aspects concern aspects of the group itself. Examples refer to the diversity of activities that are on offer and to the interaction between the childminder and the child. Contextual aspects concern the broader environment, such as the day-care centre in comparison to care at home. For an overview see Cleveland and Krashinsky (2004).

Inspection of childcare arrangements

An important instrument for increasing the quality of childcare is a regular system of monitoring childcare arrangements (OECD 2001). Most countries have an inspectorate agency on a national level such as the Ministry of Education in Iceland or the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity in Portugal. The exception is Ireland, which does not have a national inspection mechanism. Often the national departments are supported by a local level, usually by the municipalities. In reality, however, most informal arrangements are not monitored.

In addition to a government inspection mechanism, parents can influence policies by, for example, being active on boards, as is the case in Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Italy or the Slovak Republic. In contrast, parents in Iceland cannot participate in the evaluation process.

Policy issues

Beside the availability of childcare services, policy has become more and more concerned with the quality of childcare services. Different developments have led to this increasing interest. Firstly, the tasks of the staff have become more complex and demanding from a pedagogical, social and societal point of view. Secondly, the increasing impact of research on early education has also contributed to more interest. Finally, tight budget constraints may

lead to decisions that are not completely in line with quality considerations.

There are above all two policy issues that have considerable impact on quality: the qualification level of the childcare workforce, and quality control and maintenance.

A big challenge for almost all countries is to bring the profession of childcare workers more in line with that of other teachers. A higher level of training would enhance their status. Several countries are trying to raise the qualification levels.

Governments can exercise quality control by influencing the curriculum and monitoring childcare standards. Germany, for example, started a debate on quality standards for day-care centres in 1996 which resulted in the individual Länder developing different programmatic-pedagogical programmes.

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References

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European Commission's Expert Group on Gender and Employment Issues (2009), *The Provision of Childcare Services – A Comparative Review of 30 European Countries*, Brussels.

OECD (2001), *Starting Strong – Early Childhood Education and Care*, Paris.

Table

Information on structural aspects of childcare quality

	Maximum group size	Staff-child ratio	Required educational level of child carer	Inspection of and parental influence with respect to childcare arrangements
Austria	– Crèche: 11–14 – Kindergarten: 20 – Childminder: 5 Varies between the different provinces.	– Crèche: 1:5 – Kindergarten: 1:14	– Educated at 5-year specialist schools at the upper secondary level, – 2-year specialist training colleges at post-secondary level. (Training for childminders is not mandatory in all provinces, and training standards can differ greatly between regions.)	
Belgium	Regulated day-care centre: 8	Regulated day-care centre: 1:4	Depending on the community (Flemish and French), the form of care arrangement and the specific professions in the care sector (teachers, nurses, etc.).	– Professional childcare coordinators inspect the norms in childcare and support pedagogical practices. – Parents participate in the new quality system.
Czech Republic	Average number (2005/06) – Kindergarten: 23.1	Average ratio: 1:12–13	– Education at secondary vocational level, with specialisation in pre-school pedagogy, – University education.	The Czech school inspectorate assessment establishes indicators and inspects the quality of pre-schools according to them.

Table continued

	Maximum group size	Staff-child ratio	Required educational level of child carer	Inspection of and parental influence with respect to childcare arrangements
Denmark		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 2–3-year-olds: 1:3 – 3–6-year-olds: 1:6 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Childminders: personal qualifications, – Nurseries, age-integrated institutions and kindergartens: up to 1.5 years of basic educational training and 3.5 years of pedagogical education. 	Parents can influence their children's childcare through the parents' board. Staff members are also represented on the board, and guidelines and frameworks are set.
Finland	Not regulated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 0–3-year-olds: 1:4 – 3–6-year-olds: 1:7 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Day-care centres: secondary-level degree in the field, and one in three has to have a tertiary level degree (Bachelor of Education, Master of Education or Bachelor of Social Sciences). – Pre-school education: tertiary-level education. – Family day care: education generally not in line with the requirements. Since 2005 recommendation to have a vocational degree. 	
France	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Childminder: 4 – Nursery: 28–30 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Crèches: staff is trained as paediatric nursing assistants (baccalauréat + 2 years of studies). – Childminders can obtain a certificate or diploma. – Nursery schools: staff is also trained by the National Education Ministry. 	
Germany		<p>Average ratio (2006)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 0–2-year-olds: 1:6.4 – 3–5-year-olds: 1:10 – School-age children: 1:10.5 	<p>Ranges from</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – University education, – 3 years of vocational school-based training, – Shorter training as a child nurse, – No vocational training at all. 	
Greece	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Crèche: 12 – Nursery: 25 	<p>Average ratio (2004)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Public crèche and nursery: 1:18.5 	<p>Crèches and nurseries:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Educators are primarily higher education graduates (from universities or higher technological education institutes), – Most assistants have finished post-secondary vocational education. 	<p>Local authorities carry out inspections of structures.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Private crèches and nurseries: inspected by prefectures, – Private kindergartens: inspected by the local offices of the Ministry of Education.
Hungary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nursery: 12 – Kindergarten: 25 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nursery: 1:6 – Kindergarten: 1:11 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nurseries: professional qualifications, mainly secondary vocational level. – Kindergarten: three years of study in approved colleges. The Hungarian higher education system is currently in transformation, and this is expected to have an effect on the training of kindergarten teachers as well. 	
Iceland		Childminders: 1:4	Pre-school teachers and staff responsible for pedagogical care are required to obtain a university degree, which means a 3-year education programme. (Problem: demand consistently exceeds supply, leading to reliance on unskilled employees.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The Ministry of Education is responsible for the inspection of pre-primary schools. – Parents and children cannot participate in the evaluation process.

Table continued

	Maximum group size	Staff-child ratio	Required educational level of child carer	Inspection of and parental influence with respect to childcare arrangements
Ireland	Pre-school services: 24	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 0–1-year-olds: 1:3 – 1–2-year-olds: 1:5 – 2–3-year-olds: 1:6 – 3–6-year-olds: 1:8 	There is no national minimum standard in education and training, but during the past few years there has been an increase in universities and institutes offering qualifications and degree courses related to childcare.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – There is no national inspection mechanism to assess quality outside the state-financed infant classes in primary schools. – Parents can participate in the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme.
Italy		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 0–2-year-olds: 1:5–6 – 1–3-year-olds: 1:7–10 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In the past they used to have a high school professional diploma. – More recently a 3-year university degree in the field of pedagogy or child psychology and similar studies. – In addition, a theoretical and practical traineeship is required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Obligatory parents' representatives in every day-care administrative committee. – Staff and municipalities are also represented on the committees. In some areas a provincial or regional-level committee monitors the service and is charged with monitoring and evaluating the quality of private accredited day-care every year.
Netherlands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 0–1-year-olds: 12 – 0–4-year-olds: 16 – 4–8-year-olds: 20 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 0–1-year-olds: 1:4 – 1–2-year-olds: 1:5 – 2–3-year-olds: 1:6 – 3–4-year-olds: 1:8 	Minimum qualification: relevant schooling at secondary vocational level. There is currently a debate in particular on the need to employ workers with a higher vocational education.	
Poland	Not regulated	Average ratio: 1:15	Pre-school teachers are obliged to obtain pre-school teaching qualifications at the level of post-secondary education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ministry of National Education regulates the educational programme for pre-schools. – Regional education superintendent offices supervise the educational functions of public and non-public pre-schools.
Portugal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Crèche: 10–12 – Kindergarten: 25 – Childminder: 4 – Centre for out-of-school activities: 20 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Crèche: 1:6 – Kindergarten: 1:25 – Centre for out-of-school activities: 1:15 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – In crèches: 4-year university or polytechnic education; nurses and social workers with tertiary-level education. – Kindergarten: 4-year university or polytechnic degree. Teacher aides are only obliged to have secondary education, but training is now being introduced for them. – Childminders: not obliged to have a secondary education; vocational qualification programmes are being introduced. 	Services of the Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity license, supervise and inspect the performance of crèches, centres for out-of-school activities and day-care centres.
Slovak Republic	Average number Kindergarten: 20.9	Average ratio: 1:10.6	Compulsory education: tertiary schooling or special secondary education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – School inspections examine the quality of education in kindergartens and other institutions. – Parents have been questioned about this recently, and have suggested a change in the organisation of the pre-school institutions.

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	Maximum group size	Staff-child ratio	Required educational level of child carer	Inspection of and parental influence with respect to childcare arrangements
Spain	Average number – 0–3-year-olds: 14.1 – 3–6-year-olds: 21	Average ratio (2005/06): 1:10	Minimum education: 3-year university degree in (pre-) school education or a professional qualification related to childcare	
Sweden	Average number – Pre-school: 16.7 – Leisure-time-centre: 31.7	Average ratio – Pre-school: 1:5.1 – Leisure-time-centre: 1:18.9	– Pre-school and leisure-time schooling: about half of the employees have higher education teaching qualifications. – Family day-care centres: educational level is much lower, and very few have a university degree.	The National Agency for Education, as established by the government, inspects pre-schools and schools.
United Kingdom	Regulations for childminders; group care is driven by staff and space ratios.	– 0–2-year-olds: 1:3 – 2-year-olds: 1:4 – 3–7-year-olds: 1:8	– Senior managers and all full day-care supervisors are required to hold a level 3 qualification. – Other employees should hold a level 2 qualification. – All employees should have induction training and trainees under 17 should be supervised at all times.	– Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspects childcare institutions, examines complaints and enforces standards when requirements are not met. – In addition standards and inspections for registered childminders.
Norway		– 0–3-year-olds: 1:7–9 – above 3 years: 1:14–18	– Childcare services: lower share of employees with pedagogical qualifications than the other Nordic countries. – Private childminders and out-of-school care institutes (as offered by municipalities): no requirements regarding staff qualifications.	

Source: European Commission's Expert Group on Gender and Employment Issues (2009).