Measure for measure

Identifying quality in early years provision may require more than one set of measurements, as Sandra Mathers and Rosanna Singler found.

The quality of early education and care matters — not only because it affects the everyday experiences of children, but because there is overwhelming evidence that investing in high-quality early years provision in the formative years of a child’s life makes a significant difference to their long-term life chances. This is why it is so important to find effective tools to identify high quality.

Local authorities and providers use a wide range of measures, for both identifying and improving quality. These include Ofsted reports, national tools such as the Early Years Quality Improvement Support (EYQISP) materials, quality improvement tools such as the Environment Rating Scales ECERS and ITERS, and quality assurance schemes.

Our report Improving Quality in the Early Years shows that different measures do different jobs and the most effective approach is for settings to use a broad range of these measures to capture different aspects of quality. No one measure can, on its own, provide a complete picture of quality.

Improving Quality in the Early Years was a 14-month research study, funded by the Nuffield Foundation, comparing different quality measures used in England. It focused particularly on Ofsted reports, the ECERS and ITERS scales, and quality assurance schemes.

The Daycare Trust carried out focus groups with parents, providers and local authorities to explore how these different measures of quality are understood. The University of Oxford and A+ Education Ltd compared the grades awarded by Ofsted for more than 1,000 nurseries with their scores on the research-validated ECERS and ITERS rating scales.

**WHAT IS QUALITY?**
One of the key goals of the research was to establish how well these measures capture an impression of quality and how useful they were to parents, providers and local authorities. We needed first to explore what each of these groups meant by ‘quality’.

The focus groups found broad agreement on the importance of high-quality staffing, the ability of practitioners to meet children’s social, emotional and developmental needs, and the involvement of parents as partners in children’s learning. However, there were also differences in the priorities of the different groups, often depending on their roles and contexts.

For example, while providers and local authorities were more likely to mention the importance of staff training and qualifications and of strong leadership and management, parents identified supervision and health and safety as essential components of quality.

**CAPTURING QUALITY**
The next stage of the research considered how the different quality measures reflected the values of parents, providers and local authorities. All the tools we examined recognised the importance of providing for the child’s social, emotional and cognitive needs and the quality of staff-child interactions, but each measure also met different needs, according to its purpose. For example, the ECERS and ITERS are designed as fine-grained quality measures.

Someone completing an ECERS or ITERS assessment will spend most of their time directly observing practice and considering aspects such as individual staff-child interactions in great detail. In contrast, Ofsted’s function is regulatory, so inspectors spend some time assessing practice ‘in the rooms’ but also assess a broad range of factors that relate to the whole setting, such as the effectiveness of leadership and management.

These differences were borne out in our findings. Providers and local authorities felt that ECERS and ITERS captured the quality of practice more effectively, but that Ofsted reports covered other important aspects not assessed by ECERS and ITERS. Both providers and local authorities were positive about quality assurance schemes, saying that they allowed them to look at everyday practices but also to focus on the effectiveness of leadership and the needs of the staff team. This shows that different measures are complementary and a full picture of quality can be gained by using multiple tools.

Likewise, our statistical analysis showed that all three measures were related and had some ‘overlap’ but also that they captured different dimensions of quality. For example, settings which were graded as ‘outstanding’ by Ofsted were generally likely to be rated more highly on the ECERS. Settings which took part in quality assurance schemes were...
IMPLICATIONS: THE NEED FOR MULTIPLE TOOLS

Ofted reports provide parents, settings and local authorities with an external measure of quality: regulation helps to ensure certain standards are met and provides public accountability. Our report provided some recommendations for making sure that parents and providers can make best use of the information provided by Ofsted, for example by making the reports easier to understand for parents and making sure that the different grades awarded to a setting give useful information about their strengths and weaknesses (our analysis showed that 45 per cent of settings in our sample were awarded the same grade for all sub-judgements in their Ofsted report).

However, our findings also give cause for thought on the purpose of regulation and its possible limitations. Ofsted provides us with important information about quality but cannot – and is not designed to – fulfill all needs. Inspection reports do not capture all the elements of quality assessed by the ECERS and ITERS, and the focus groups confirmed that infrequent and relatively broad inspections could not capture all the aspects they valued, or provide all the motivation settings need to improve quality.

The report concluded that Ofsted grades should not necessarily be relied upon as a complete and accurate measure of the quality of practice.

The clear implication for providers is that there is a range of tools that is needed to capture a broad and deep picture of quality, and to encourage and support quality improvement. Our report recommends that providers and local authorities are supported in using a variety of quality improvement tools to supplement the regulatory Ofsted process, and highlighted the importance of providers understanding that Ofsted grades do not give a complete picture.

It also has important implications for the way in which funding decisions around early education are made, particularly in relation to the free entitlement for disadvantaged two-year-olds. Our research suggests that decisions should not be made on the basis of Ofsted grades alone.

In relation to parents, one of the key conclusions was that parents may need access to other information on quality to support them in choosing high-quality provision for their children. At the moment, Ofsted reports are usually the only measure available to parents to help them make choices between settings.

We found that parents both want and need greater assistance in identifying quality. The report recommended that local authorities might consider whether some of the wider information that they hold on childcare settings could be shared with parents, and suggested that parents may also need more support to help them understand the information they provide.

By using all the available tools to establish a complete picture, providers and local authorities not only have the potential to ‘communicate’ their quality to parents, but also to improve the everyday experiences of children as well as their long-term life chances.

REFERENCES


Sandra Mathers is lead researcher at Department of Education, University of Oxford and director of A+ Education, and Rosanna Singler is policy and research officer at Daycare Trust