1 A brief introduction

The American socio-biologist Sarah Hrdy describes the phenomena of nurseries in this way:

grouping infants together – like bats in a communal nursery – for a certain number of hours everyday under the supervision of paid alloparents (substitute parents) who are not kin, but who are expected to act as if they are, is an evolutionary novelty, completely experimental. ¹

Explanations of quality

This book is concerned with one particular aspect of early childhood: that is the societal arrangements that are made for the care and education of young children. It enquires what rationales are being put forward to justify them, and how they are judged in providing a service. What does quality mean in these circumstances, and who arbitrates? As Hrdy’s quotation colourfully indicates, nurseries offer a relatively new way of bringing up children. In a few countries, such as Belgium and France, full-time nursery education for children aged 3–5 was well established over a hundred years ago. Day nurseries, by which I mean the communal housing of very young infants, are more recent and more controversial. But the regular and widespread use of nursery education and day nurseries in most countries has only really happened in the last 25–50 years, or less. In some countries it hasn’t happened systematically at all.

In Chapters 2 and 3, I explore the kinds of policy rationales, sometimes overlapping and sometimes used in separate ways that are used as a justification for developing early childhood services. Currently there are two main rationales in use, sometimes used in tandem, sometimes used without acknowledgement or understanding of what the other involves. The first is that women/parents need to reconcile family and work obligations, and childcare is a necessary support in order for women to work. Second, early education interventions
are an essential foundation for subsequent learning and schooling. There are various versions of these rationales, plus some additional rationales, which I will try to detail.

These rationales are often historic. In fact in all countries there has been a complicated policy history in introducing early education and care services, which reflects wider national concerns and dilemmas that may have very little to do with early childhood per se. These origins may be long since forgotten, yet they nevertheless continue to influence current provision, in what is sometimes called ‘path dependency’ or ‘policy stickiness’. Current research and theory is usually dominated by relatively short-term policy perspectives, but policy rationales almost always have roots in the past. Rationales for policy are important because they determine the issues around which discussions of quality take place. The frame for quality is set by governments, by intent and by default, even if the learning and development that occurs among children in nurseries may depend in the last resort on an individual relationship between an adult and a child.

In Chapters 4, 5, and 6 I discuss quality at a systemic level. In each country early childhood education and care (ECEC) encompasses a different spectrum of services. In each country the auspices differ, that is nursery provision may be organized at a national or at a local level, financed in different kinds of ways, or be delivered by the state itself or by a variety of providers. In each country too, there is more or less education, more or less care, more or less training of those who work in the sector, more or less attention to social circumstances.

In the view of a number of international organizations who have taken an international overview of early education and care services – OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), Unicef, Unesco and the EU – the extent to which the system is coherent and extensive critically determines quality. Unicef for example gives 10 indicators of quality. Some of these indicators, for example levels of poverty or child health, are not directly concerned with early childhood services but critically affect the effectiveness of such services. When children experience conditions of acute poverty and inequality then it is an uphill battle for early childhood services to compensate for these disadvantages. I focus on the work of these international organizations, and the discussions they have had about quality in Chapter 4.

In Chapter 5 I discuss the role of the market and the attempts to regulate it. A major new concern in the development of early childhood services has been the growth of private for-profit provision for those who can pay for it. In the USA, as I indicate below, the childcare sector has always been predicated on the private market. But this has not been the case in other developed or rich countries. In the UK there has been a startling turnaround and from having a mainly government funded and delivered system, there has been a substantial growth of the private sector. For-profit programmes, run as small businesses or as corporate endeavours, may present particular problems of quality.
Understandings of quality have become closely linked to the ideas of choice and value for money. I explore the evidence about the way the growth of the private market has changed people’s perceptions of services, and in turn reshaped the notion of quality. Adult–child ratios, curricula, levels of training, and space requirements may all be subject to regulation, but the person (or company) who runs the private provision may embody a particular ethos in which profit, accumulating income, is of paramount importance, over and above other considerations of child learning or parent well-being.

In Chapter 6 I discuss issues of curriculum and training and explore how they vary internationally. What children should be learning and how they should be learning have led to some very public battles. In the early childhood sector, where training is not consistent or mandatory within or across countries, many research findings suggest that the level of training, initial and in-service, is the most important single factor in achieving high quality services. I review some of the evidence about how training is conceptualized and carried out across different countries. A key issue here is gender, and I include reflections on the traditional notions of gender and caring and how they are linked.

After considering more general issues, I explore quality at programme and practice levels. There is less variation and less bad practice where services are well-funded and systematically organized, but of course there is good and bad in every system. So what makes a difference between those projects which are described as ‘high quality’ and those which are not?

In Chapter 7, working spaces, I explore space and design for adults and children. Space and design seem to me to be very neglected areas of quality, partly because in the UK, and in some other countries, children’s physical activities and aesthetic feelings are completely under-rated as an aspect of their well-being and as an underpinning of their learning. I think working spaces matter, for children as well as for adults. The practical spatial organization of early education and care work raises some fundamental issues.

In Chapter 8, I consider ideas about working practices. There is a literature about co-operative management (although less so in the field of early years), which suggests that worker participation and decision-making may be more productive of quality than hierarchical management. Leadership and good resource management are clearly important in any sector, and there is a substantial literature about leadership in the early years, but does ownership and participative or collegial practice matter too? I review the evidence and make some suggestions about management and leadership.

In Chapter 9 I discuss the kinds of relationships teachers and practitioners forge with individual children, and the way in which children’s learning is encouraged. Individual relationships matter enormously although what is valued is also highly cultural. As Bruner has famously said ‘perhaps even more than with most cultural matters, childrearing practices and beliefs reflect local conceptions of how the world is and how the child should be readied for living it’.2
The intimacy, continuity and contextual nature of familial relationships and the cultural understandings they draw upon cannot easily – if at all – be replicated in an institutional setting, where unrelated groups of children and adults must rub along together. Hence Sarah Hrdy’s remark about the unfamiliarity and strangeness of the idea of nursery provision. Ideas and understandings about how adults should conduct themselves and what they should be doing in nurseries are often treated as straightforward when they are not. Many practitioners working in the field are trained at a basic and vocational level, especially those caring for very young children, and their didactic training does not equip them to deal with abstract ideas and challenging issues. Some theories of practice do push these boundaries, especially those labelled as ‘postmodern’ and I discuss them in this chapter.

For slightly older children, the emphasis switches to learning and how practitioners (or teachers) can encourage learning. I have met practitioners who have a joie de vivre and a gift for inspiration who can captivate the attention of any group of children they work with. One of my most vivid memories is of a teacher with a very large (50 or so) group of children passing round a large onion and talking about its taste, texture, smell and preparation. She managed to hold the attention of the children despite the size of the group and the inappropriateness of the surroundings – a large hall. When knowledge is regarded as something to transmit – or where circumstances are difficult – teaching is valued as performance. In this sense a good teacher is like an entrancing magician, with a repertoire of activities, constantly refreshed, maintained and polished. But if knowledge is regarded as participative and co-constructed, additional or different skills are required. Being ingenious and inspiring in finding topics and projects and resources in working with children is only half the story. The other half of course is to be able to relate to the children themselves, to be able to listen, to enable them to voice their situations and enlarge their understanding.

Children’s learning in the early years is phenomenal, but it is also subject to considerable interpretation by adults. Practitioners and professionals are taught to draw on a normative idea of childhood, an understanding derived from the field of child development, of children’s capabilities and needs. In very diverse situations, where children come from a wide range of backgrounds and may exhibit a wide range of behaviours, then such norms – essentially derived from a white Anglo-American view of early childhood – are insufficient preparations for practice. Learning to deal with diversity, of race, class, language and health, presents many challenges for practice. In writing about quality, I necessarily deal with issues of diversity. These issues are especially pertinent in poorer countries, where the resources available to children are very meagre. I focus on the attempts made in poor countries to introduce early education and care – and on the attempts of rich countries to influence them – in Chapter 10.
Each level in the account of what quality means raises questions of analysis, measurement and accountability. There are various standardized tools for measuring quality in early childhood, mostly at a programme and a practice level, and I discuss the use of some of these measures. But as I have indicated, the matter is not simple. To use the word ‘quality’ implies that children are being well cared for and educated, and we are doing the best for them that we can. In reality ‘quality’ is a layered concept which reflects a range of assumptions about childhood, and about provision for and practice with young children.

At an international comparative level – the comparisons made by such bodies as OECD, the EU and Unicef – measurement may include an overview of the tools and frameworks which are in place in a country for assuring quality – legal frameworks, codes of practice, training requirements, voluntary codes of practice etc. Or it might encompass issues of service accessibility, sustainability of services and working conditions of frontline staff; or a specification of the skills of the workers involved.

At a programme level it may include the degree of involvement of users and workers in the implementation of the service; or advice, complaints and redress procedures; or cyclical processes such as participatory review mechanisms. Or it may just focus on child outcomes; or the extent to which the service contributes to maternal employment. Or it may try to measure children’s well-being. I was at a conference where a childcare consultant said her criterion for quality was ‘Are the children happy?’ This is a nice approach, and no doubt genuine, but it is not the full story. All the other aspects of nursery provision cannot simply be waived away.

Ideas and priorities about quality differ from country to country, and within countries. Standard measurements undoubtedly have their uses as a comparative tool, as a means of obtaining a systematic overview of a particular situation. But such tools are only good for what they set out to measure. Using a centimetre ruler, even when it is subdivided into millimetres, is not going to help you measure the volume of sound on a radio. Using an instrument such as the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale will tell you little about the organization or cohesion of the early education and care system, or the political claims which are being made for it – although you might legitimately infer that, given the lower end of the scale, what is being measured may sometimes be dire.

So although standard measurements may be useful in highlighting broad variations across programmes or practice, they offer relatively limited information, which somebody else (a politician?) has to interpret if changes are to be made. The extent to which policy is evidence based – or as the cynics put it, the extent to which evidence is policy driven – is something of a sore point in the voluminous literature on the relationship between policy and research. On the other hand more or less everyone acknowledges the need for accountability,
to the taxpayers, to parents, and increasingly to the children who experience the service. How necessary is it for parents and children to voice their views on services? How might it be undertaken? Although questions of measurement arise throughout the book, I deal with measurement specifically in Chapter 11.

In Chapter 12, I try to sum up the many arguments I have raised. As Sarah Hrdy suggests, we are still experimenting. We engage in many novel evolutionary behaviours but Hrdy’s comments raise the question about how one can understand ‘quality’ in the light of something that may be ‘unnatural’ or counter-instinctual in the first place, especially when there is such a variety of understandings of what constitutes good care and education. I conclude that it might be more appropriate to think of quality not as a noun but as a verb. Quality might be best viewed as a search for improvement, a search to provide the best we can for the young children who are being educated and cared for by people other than their parents, but it is a search where the topics, the strategies and methodologies still require much elaboration.

**Internationalism**

In this book I take an international perspective on quality in early childhood services. I do this partly because there are similarities as well as differences in the way in which people educate and care for young children in various places, and making sense of these similarities and differences broadens and deepens any discussion about quality. In addition, what others see from their various perspectives of history and geography may help us overcome our own parochialism, in whichever country we reside. Quality is nothing if not relative, and there are no magic formulae, only many adjustments to suit each set of circumstances.

I argue that history and geography cannot be ignored. As well as enlarging our horizons, they help us to combat the parochialism that is very often the enemy of quality. My own claims to have an international perspective arise from the work I have undertaken for international agencies, including the OECD, and most recently for an EU project comparing early education and care services, regulation and quality across Europe, which I discuss in Chapter 4. While somewhat ashamed of my carbon footprint, nevertheless I am very grateful for the exceptional opportunities that I have had to discuss issues of quality in so many places.

Countries like Canada, Australia and New Zealand are to an extent chips off the old block and reflect the particular political and policy dilemmas of an English liberal heritage. A lot of development work in the field of early childhood has taken place in each of these countries, through dedicated advocacy and research, and offers useful lessons on quality which I try to include.

But I have been particularly fortunate in that some of the international work I have done has taken me to some extraordinary places in Africa and Asia,
and there the challenges to conventional understanding about what quality means are much greater. Jones writing about early childhood in Peru, as part of the *Young Lives* project, suggests:

> it is critical to unpack culturally specific understandings of core cultural concepts . . . (such as ‘children’, ‘family’ and ‘work’) and how these are subject to competing interpretations and reinterpretations in societies undergoing rapid social, political, economic and demographic transitions.³

Cultural unpacking is necessarily part of the account in this book.

Working in these countries confronts us with issues of knowledge transfer. Many of the ideas and understandings about early childhood have been articulated and published in the global North, in rich countries, and are applied willy-nilly to poor countries in the global South whether they are relevant and appropriate or not – a phenomenon I have described elsewhere as ‘Travelling policies and global buzzwords’.⁴ In writing about quality, I also hope to be able to question the way in which ideas about quality in early childhood services are so blithely and inappropriately exported from one country to another, especially from rich countries to poorer ones.

The process of knowledge transfer is nowhere more pronounced than in the USA. Some of the most gifted writers, some of the most interesting research, and some of the most innovative practice in the field of early childhood come from the USA. Yet in terms of the range and quality of its early childhood services, the USA ranks near or at the bottom of every league table. It is utterly in hock to the for-profit sector, and increasingly, to the corporate sector. Research on early childhood from the USA infrequently acknowledges that this is the case, taking what is exceptional in every other country as too ordinary for comment. The USA also has one of the greatest inequality (or gini) ratings among developed nations and is weak in providing the redistributive services, such as health care and other social benefits, which in other countries are used to counter inequality. This degree of inequality and social segregation skews understandings about what might be expected or achieved in the delivery of early childhood services. I am at pains to state this so clearly because the USA is held up so often as a model. The World Bank, which funds early education and care programmes in poor countries throughout the world, uses little or no other evidence in support of the programmes it promotes other than the evidence from the USA. Human capital theory, widely cited by economists as a rationale for investing in early childhood, relies heavily on evidence from the USA. And so on. It is a distortion to regard the extreme circumstances of the USA as anything other than as exceptional, and therefore parochial.

In discussing the concept of quality it is important to understand the strengths, but also the limitations, sometimes the grave limitations, of the
evidence available. These questions of international understanding underwrite the book.

Notes


