CHAPTER 2

Early Childhood Education and Care Today: Impact, Policies, Quality

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Abstract This chapter includes a brief description of the current framework and challenges related to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). It discusses the diversity of the existing terms regarding early childhood education and recent research findings in regard to the effects ECEC quality has on children's development and well-being. The chapter also deals with the professional development of early childhood educators and the policies adopted around the world to promote it. Finally, it focuses on the current momentum in efforts to improve the quality of ECEC as a result of the various policies being developed and implemented.

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A. Gregoriadis et al. (eds.), *Professional Development and Quality in Early Childhood Education*, DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-64212-3_2

Keywords Quality · Early childhood education · Professional development · Observation rating scales · EPPE

Chapter Outline

- Why early childhood education? Framework, significance, and quality effects
- ECEC in the twenty-first century: International policies, professional development, and the pursuit of quality

2.1 Why Early Childhood Education? Framework, Significance, and Quality Effects

2.1.1 Early Childhood Education and Care Framework

Early childhood is recognized today as one of the most important periods in human life. The time from birth to eight years of age is crucial for the healthy physical, emotional, and cognitive growth a child (UNICEF, n.d.). A consolidated body of research acknowledges that the early experiences of young children form the basis for their subsequent developmental potential and lifelong learning. Early childhood is typically defined by professional organizations that relate to young children as lasting from birth to eight years or to primary school entry age (which is not the same in all countries) (Rao & Sun, 2010). It is during those years that children are introduced to early childhood education services.

Early childhood education (ECE) is a broad term used to describe all types of services for children ranging in age from birth to six years. The term is used interchangeably with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), Preschool Education (PSE), Early Care and Education (ECE), and Pre-Primary Education (PPE) (Rao & Sun, 2010) and basically describes all types of services and pre-primary educational programs that prepare children for formal primary education (Choi, 2006). Apart from being a preparatory period that assists children's transition to formal schooling, UNESCO (n.d.) also uses the term Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) to emphasize the overall development of children and their well-being. The different terms associated with early childhood

education that are found in the literature and are being used by various institutes, organizations, and researchers reflect the diverse foci of services for preschool children and the age group covered (Rao & Sun, 2010).

The present chapter uses the term Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) when referring to pre-primary education services. It is used extensively in the literature and is also a term that is employed in most of the countries that participated in the Early Change project (see Chap. 4 for more details on the project). A relatively adequate definition of ECEC is provided in a Eurydice/EACEA (2014) report, which describes it as "provision for children from birth through to primary education that is subject to a national regulatory framework, i.e., it must comply with a set of rules, minimum standards and/or undergo accreditation procedures. It includes: public, private and voluntary sectors; centre-based as well as home-based provision" (p. 3).

2.1.2 Recent Findings About the Importance of ECEC

In an era of great economic, social, political, and cultural changes such as those we are living today, various international institutes and organizations such as UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), OMEP (World Organization for Early Childhood Education and Care), and OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) have repeatedly highlighted the need to implement more serious and comprehensive policies in order to provide high-quality ECEC for every child. For example, the Education for All Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO, 2006) outlines compelling reasons for investing in the early years, but the development of effective ECEC programs and strategies requires evidence-based policies. Hence, systematically conducted and methodologically rigorous research about the quality of early childhood education settings and children's experience must provide the bases for national and international educational and social policies (OECD, 2015).

Toward this end there has been significant progress in recent years. An extended body of scholarship has focused on how the quality of ECEC settings impact children's development and well-being and has emphasized methodological rigor. Studies on ECEC quality in the last fifteen years have been characterized by increasing sophistication in the research designs (e.g., longitudinal, observational, and quasi-experimental studies) used to examine

the potential confounding effects of the impact of ECEC settings (Burchinal, Magnuson, Powell, & Soliday Hong, 2015). Recent research has documented the beneficial effects of ECEC services for the communities, the families, and especially the preschool children (Eurofound, 2015). A constantly accumulating body of research findings (e.g., Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010) has shown that the quality of ECEC settings and experiences is associated with children's enhanced (a) academic, (b) social, and (c) health outcomes in developed and developing countries.

(a) When it comes to academic gains, research attests that high-quality ECEC settings and experiences impact almost all aspects of children's outcomes and intellectual development (Peisner-Feinberg & Burchinal, 1997). In a longitudinal study, van Tuijl and Lesseman (2007) showed that attending preschool and experiencing high-quality ECEC influences children's general cognitive abilities, even in the case of disadvantaged children from low-income and ethnic-minority families. Sabol, Soliday Hong, Pianta, and Burchinal (2013) note that early childhood education programs with enriched settings and supportive teacher-child interactions promote children's learning and school readiness, and point to the fact that in the United States most children from low-income backgrounds attend programs that are not of the highest quality. In another study, Sabol and Pianta (2014) show that high-quality ECEC programs contribute significantly to children's readiness for school, especially in the case of disadvantaged children. Analogous findings reported by Burchinal et al. (2008) show that publicly funded pre-kindergarten and kindergarten programs promote school readiness and predict the acquisition of language and pre-academic skills. Similarly, in a large-scale study with 6250 children three to five years old, Keys, Farkas, Burchinal, Duncan, Vandell, and Howes (2013) found associations between the observed quality of ECEC settings and children's school readiness skills.

In many U.S. studies, ECEC quality has been linked to modest but statistically significant benefits in connection with cognitive and social skills as well as in language (e.g., Burchinal et al., 2015). Robust evidence from experimental and quasi-experimental studies revealed that high-quality ECEC programs have modest to causal effects on children's outcomes. A recent analysis that included evaluations of 84 preschool programs concluded that, on average, young children gain about a third of a year of additional learning regarding language, reading, and math skills (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). During secondary analyses, Keys et al. (2013) reported small but statistically significant correlations between the quality of ECEC programs and their effects on language

and mathematics outcomes. Similarly, Auger, Farkas, Burchinal, Duncan, and Vandell (2014) found modest causal links between gains in language and math and the quality of ECEC measured by global quality indicators (Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-ECERS-R; Caregiver Interaction Scale-CIS). In a seminal meta-analysis, Burchinal, Kainz, and Cai (2011) reviewed 20 early education and care projects that reported 97 associations among globally accepted measures of quality and child outcomes. The purpose of this meta-analysis, according to its authors, was to estimate the level of association between widely used measures of observed classroom quality (e.g., ECERS-R, ECERS-E, CLASS, ITERS) and well-established measures of child outcomes (Burchinal et al., 2011). The results of this study demonstrated the extent to which high-quality ECEC programs contribute to children's better outcome scores in reading, vocabulary, math, etc.

(b) When it comes to social skills, the effects of ECEC programs on socioemotional development (e.g., positive behaviors such as showing empathy and cooperation or behavior problems such as aggressive, withdrawn, hyperactive, antisocial behaviors) have been documented in several studies. Two classic projects from previous years have revealed the long-term effect of high-quality ECEC services on children's socioemotional development.

The first project was the Perry Preschool project (Schweinhart et al., 2005), an experiment that highlighted short- and long-term effects of a high-quality ECEC program for young children and especially for those living in poverty. In a randomized control trial, the project was found to have reduced children's externalizing behavior problems in primary school and later (Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2012). The second project was the Abecedarian project (Ramey & Campbell, 1991), which included an early child development initiative in a low-income African-American area in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. This randomized control trial involved 111 children whose mothers had a low intelligence quotient (IQ) and low income divided into two groups. The results showed that children who participated in a high-quality ECEC program displayed improved social behaviors, which were still in evidence at age twenty one, compared to the children in the control group (Melhuish, 2004).

Additional support for ECEC quality effects on children's outcomes and socioemotional development was provided by a meta-analysis that focused on the evaluations of 20 early childhood programs involving experimental or quasi-experimental designs (Karoly, Kilburn, & Cannon, 2005). The authors found evidence of significant effects of ECEC settings on both academic and

social outcomes for the majority of the programs evaluated. In a more recent study with 2028 pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children, Curby et al. (2009) reported that based on classroom observations, academic and social development can be predicted from the quality of the interactions between teachers and children and that children benefit from high-quality ECEC experiences. Another study with classroom-based observations (Pianta et al., 2005) showed that ECEC programs with positive classroom climates and supportive interactions benefit children's social skills, classroom adaptation, and development. In a longitudinal study in Norway (Borge & Melhuish, 1995), results showed that good-quality preschool experience from age four upward tends to reduce behavior problems. Similarly, Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, and Mashburn (2010) found that the quality of teacher-child interactions is a stronger predictor of fewer behavior problems and increased social competence in ECEC settings with higher quality. The authors also suggested that high-quality ECEC programs are a prerequisite for improving social and academic outcomes of young children, especially low-income children. Moreover, Yoshikawa et al. (2013) showed that supportive and stimulating interactions help young children acquire new knowledge and social skills and foster engagement in learning.

(c) In terms of the effects on health, there is a relative dearth of studies on the relationship between ECEC quality and its impact on children's health. Head Start was one of the few programs that directly examined the effects of preschool on children's health. According to Gordon, Fujimoto, Kaestner, Korenman, and Abner (2013), Head Start increased child immunization rates and enhanced the health screening of young children (e.g., for measles, diabetes, respiratory difficulties). The Perry Preschool project, discussed above, also identified a correlation between health gains among young children and high-quality ECEC services. In this project pointed to various short-term gains (e.g., better health in children) and long-term advantages (e.g., significantly reduced use of sleeping pills, sedatives, and heroine in 40-year olds). In another study, one of the characteristics attributed to a high-quality ECEC setting was the promotion of awareness of a healthy lifestyle in young children (Underdown, 2007). Since most healthy habits are more easily adopted during the pre-primary years, it is considered essential that ECEC settings introduce new attitudes and behaviors to prevent obesity and a sedentary way of living early in life (Birch, Parker, & Burns, 2011).

Most of the studies described thus far took place in developed and wealthy countries, but the positive impact of high-quality ECEC programs has been well established in less affluent countries as well. Preschool

center-based ECEC has been linked with improved academic and social outcomes for children in underdeveloped as well as developing countries and is often considered to be an effective way to reduce the gap in schooling between high- and low-income children (Burchinal et al., 2015; Engle et al., 2011). For example, in countries such as Chile (Urzua & Veramendi, 2010) and Kenya, Uganda, and Zanzibar (Mwaura et al., 2008) children with experience in ECEC settings evidenced better academic outcomes in comparison with those that did not. In other countries such Mauritius (Rain, Mellingen, Liu, Venables, & Mednick, 2003) and Bangladesh (Moore, Akhter, & Aboud, 2008), children in ECEC settings were reported as having fewer behavior problems than those who did not have access to similar services.

2.1.3 ECEC and Large-Scale Studies

Apart from all the research findings that have been noted so far, what is perhaps even more significant regarding the recent developments and the advances in research regarding quality in the ECEC field is that large-scale studies mostly in the United States and the United Kingdom are looking at all the elements involved in ECEC together. Children's learning and development, cognitive, language, academic, and social skills, family characteristics, and the child's well-being are considered as forming an interconnected network that has to be understood in its totality. Large-scale studies, such as the U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Development (NICHD) project and the U.K. Effective Preschool and Primary Education (EPPE) project have shifted the researchers' interest from investigating the simple effects of early education to interpreting the complex familial and educational processes that occur during a young child's development (Sylva & EPPE Team, 2010a).

The NICHD study was a longitudinal project that followed 1300 children from ten different areas in the United States from the moment they were born. The findings revealed both quantitative and qualitative effects of ECEC programs. In particular, the NICHD study (2002a) showed that the quality of ECEC settings has a bearing on the social competence of young children. Factors such as time spent in group care, maternal sensitivity, and time devoted to childcare were partially mediated by the quality of the ECEC services (NICHD, 2003). Despite some criticism about the sampling procedures, which may have underrepresented low-quality ECEC settings (Melhuish, 2004), the NICHD study has provided strong evidence that the quality of ECEC services offered to young children is important (NICHD, 2002b).

The EPPE project was a multilevel longitudinal study that collected a wide range of information about children's cognitive and socioemotional development, their parents, their home learning environments, and the ECEC settings they attended. The national sample for the project included more than 3000 children ages 3 and 4 from various ECEC settings in England (Sammons, 2010a), and is the first-large scale project to produce evidence about the lasting effects of ECEC services on children's intellectual and socioemotional development (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2010). Moreover, the EPPE project in the United Kingdom and the Effective Provision of Preschool in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) revealed that high-quality ECEC programs were related to stronger academic and social skills at school entry age and improved students' English and math scores, referring especially to students from disadvantaged families (Melhuish, 2010; Melhuish et al., 2006; Sylva et al., 2004).

Another large-scale project called SEED (Study of Early Education and Development) is just starting to produce outcomes, and it shows how childcare and early education can help to give children a better start in life. SEED, which was commissioned by the Department of Education (U.K.), is updating the evidence from EPPSE (Effective Primary, Pre-School and Secondary Education). A major new longitudinal study that is following more than 5000 children two years of age till they reach the age of seven, SEED is attempting to determine the factors that are important for the provision of high-quality childcare (SEED, 2017).

To summarize, Sect. 2.1 discussed in brief the diversity of existing terms regarding early childhood education and provided a definition of the term and the notion of ECEC. It also presented the latest research findings regarding the impact high-quality ECEC settings can have on children's well-being, academic and social outcomes, and lifelong learning. Most importantly, it described the crucial role ECEC has on children's development and subsequent trajectory. As several researchers have noted (e.g., Bumgarner & Brooks-Gunn, 2015; Sammons et al., 2008), children who lack strong foundations early in their lives are unlikely to overcome this dearth and the disadvantage remains over time. Hence, it is of primary importance that policymakers and academic communities focus their attention toward the goal of providing high-quality early childhood education and care settings for young children. Clearly, the first and most basic prerequisite for such an ambition is to define and comprehend in depth the notion of quality in ECEC.

2.2 ECEC in the Twenty-First Century: International Policies, Professional Development, and the Pursuit of Quality

2.2.1 International Perspectives and Policies on ECEC

Most of the research on ECEC quality has focused primarily on the potential effect this quality can have on the intellectual and social development and the well-being of children. As was noted above, the difficulty in separating the effects of ECEC from those of other factors (e.g., family SES, maternal education) led to large-scale studies utilizing more rigorous methodology. Studies such as EPPE have shown that the quality of ECEC experiences is directly associated with cognitive, social, and behavioral development when children attend ECEC programmes or attend higher-quality ECEC programmes compared with children not attending or attending lower quality programmes (Taggart, 2010). Findings from the EPPE study even go so far as to suggest that "the difference in child development between having preschool and not having preschool is 4–6 months of development. For the highest-quality integrated centers, the difference can be as much as nine months" (Her Majesty's Treasury, 2004, p. 66). Findings of this nature could and should have a considerable impact on policy.

It is likely that results such as these have led to the unprecedented attention focused on early childhood education in the public and political sphere in recent years. Several governments have adopted ambitious policies to improve both the quality and the quantity of ECEC provision (Urban, 2009). ECEC holds a central position on the current policy agenda of many OECD countries (OECD, 2015). Of course, the motives behind these political agendas are mainly economic (e.g., employment, competitiveness) and on a secondary level social. However, there are other rationales behind the policy agendas of stakeholders, policy-makers, and early childhood institutions. Apart from pursuing gender equality in an economy-dominated society, the goal to expand the quantity and quality of ECEC is viewed as necessary for educational attainment, for lifelong learning, and for social inclusion (Urban, 2009). ECEC is often viewed as a social investment strategy in social welfare models owing to its contribution to facilitating parental employment (Campbell-Barr, 2016). The most basic goals of the policies adopted in various OECD countries are to support female labor market

participation, reduce the inequality and social gap for the more disadvantaged social groups, and address childhood poverty (OECD, 2006).

The three most important challenges ECEC faces today are access to, enrollment in, and quality of the provided services. In the majority of the so-called developed countries, most children have access to education before they are five years old. For many of the OECD countries, enrollment rates continue to increase for children above 3 years of age (OECD, 2015). Still, there is a long way to go before every child has equal access to high-quality ECEC provision, at least in the European Union (EU).

In recent years, the international policies at the EU level have increasingly emphasized the advantages of investing in high-quality and accessible ECEC provision. The EU's initial interest in improving access to ECEC can be traced back to 1992, when the Council Recommendations on Childcare published specific proposals for a Ten-Year Action Program (European Commission Childcare Network, 2004). Subsequent actions included the Barcelona European Council agreement (European Council, 2002) that "Member States should remove disincentives to female labour force participation, taking into account the demand for childcare facilities and in line with national patterns of provision, to provide childcare by 2010 to at least 90% of children between three years old and the mandatory school age…" (p. 12). At this point, it is worth mentioning that there was no reference to "quality" and that it was not set as a goal in the EU agenda (European Commission Thematic Group on ECEC Quality, 2014). In 2009, the European Council developed a framework for cooperation in education and training called "Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training-ET2020" (European Council, 2009). The ET2020 strategy (European Commission, 2016) set four common EU objectives to address challenges in education and training systems by 2020:

- Making lifelong learning and mobility a reality.
- Improving the quality and efficiency of education and training.
- Promoting equity, social cohesion, and active citizenship.
- Enhancing creativity and innovation, including entrepreneurship, at all levels of education and training.

In addition, one of the benchmarks of the ET2020 strategy that was set for education was increasing access to high-quality ECEC by achieving at least a 95% participation of children between the age of 4 and

compulsory school age in ECEC settings by 2020. It is only within the last few years that quality was officially recognized as an important pursuit for ECEC. In 2011, the European Council decided that whereas substantial attention was being given to the quantity of ECEC settings, the quality of the settings was neglected and that the latter was equally significant (Council of the European Union, 2011). The European Commission responded to these Council conclusions and to requests of member states by setting up a Thematic Working Group on Early Childhood Education and Care (Eurofound, 2015). This initiative, which was launched within the context of the Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training-ET2020 (ibid.), created a European Quality Framework (EQF) for ECEC (European Commission Thematic Group on ECEC Quality, 2014). EQF includes eight quality statements, two of which (Statements 3 and 4) refer to the role of the ECEC workforce in contributing toward promoting and supporting pedagogical quality of services for young children and improving their academic and social outcomes. The statements are as follows:

1. Provision that is available and affordable to all families and their children.
2. Provision that encourages participation, strengthens social inclusion, and embraces diversity.
3. Well-qualified staff whose initial and continuing training enables them to fulfill their professional roles.
4. Supportive working conditions including professional leadership which creates opportunities for observation, reflection, planning, teamwork and cooperation with parents.
5. A curriculum based on pedagogic goals, values, and approaches which enable children to reach their full potential in a holistic way.
6. A curriculum which requires staff to collaborate with children, colleagues and parents and to reflect on their own practice.
7. Monitoring and evaluating produces information at the relevant local, regional, and/or national level to support continuing improvements in the quality of policy and practice.
8. Monitoring and evaluation which is in the best interest of the child.

(European Commission Thematic Group on ECEC Quality, 2014, pp. 9–10)

2.2.2 *ECEC Quality and Professional Development*

With these statements, the European Commission Thematic Group on ECEC Quality (2014) acknowledged the role played by the ECEC workforce in improving the quality of services for young children. As Campbell-Barr (2016) notes, "the discursive formation of quality ECEC … has identified the ECEC workforce as central to quality" (p. 2). Such an admission seems rather obvious, since early childhood educators who work in ECEC will obviously influence the quality of provision based on their actions and attitudes, their pedagogical practices, their interactions with children, etc. (ibid. p. 2). That being so, how can stakeholders and educational policies support early childhood educators in their roles?

International policy organizations such as the OECD (2012a) and UNESCO (2006) are recognizing the working conditions of the ECEC workforce and their professional development as important determinants of ECEC quality. Moreover, there is a broad consensus in the recent literature that the quality of ECEC services is directly associated with the professionalization of its workforce (e.g., Lazzari, Picchio, & Mussati, 2013; Mathers, Singler, & Karemaker, 2012). In the quest for high-quality services, various studies and reports (e.g., Eurofound, 2015; Oberhuemer, 2013) confirm that improving the working conditions and promoting the professional development of ECEC staff will improve the quality of provision as well.

A set of recent research findings on professional development and staff qualifications highlights the fact that early childhood educators with good qualifications are more likely to offer stimulating learning environments and high-quality pedagogy (Eurofound, 2015; OECD, 2012b). But is improving the ECEC quality only a matter of improving the qualifications of the ECEC workforce? Staff qualifications by themselves are not necessarily sufficient to predict the quality of ECEC provision (European Commission Thematic Group on ECEC Quality, 2014). Conclusions about any potential causal links must be made with caution.

In a large-scale study, Early et al. (2007) showed that more initial education of staff is not, on its own, adequate for improving the quality of ECEC. Rather, Urban, Vanderbroeck, Peeters, Lazzari, and van Laere (2011) propose that it is both the initial and continuing training that enables practitioners to fulfill their professional roles. Additionally, Fukkink and Lont (2007) suggest that while ongoing professionalization of staff is an essential factor for improving children's outcomes, professional development in itself does not necessarily have a direct impact on children's outcomes.

Based on these arguments, specific questions arise about early childhood educators' continuing professional development (CPD), such as: "Which CPD model is the most effective?" "Which type of professional knowledge is the most fundamental?" (Pirard & Barbier, 2012). Eraut, (1994) suggests possible answers by noting that apart from the type of professional knowledge being acquired, the context through which it is acquired and the educational environment in which the early childhood educators have their CPD experiences are equally important. Likewise, Nuttall, Coxon, and Read (2009) also describe CPD as a complex and rather context-specific procedure.

Moreover, according to the European Commission (2012):

> [T]eaching competences are complex combinations of knowledge, skills, understanding, values and attitudes, leading to effective action in situation. […] The range and complexity of competencies required for teaching in actual societies is so great that any one individual is unlikely to have them all, nor to have developed them all to the same high degree. […] Teachers' continuing professional development (CPD) is, thus, highly relevant both for improving educational performance and effectiveness and for enhancing teachers' commitment. (pp. 8–9)

To conclude this discussion about early childhood educators' professional development in relation to ECEC quality, it is important to note that although a substantial number of in-service training programs still adopt a format that offers generalized knowledge and information through courses and training days (Gregoriadis, Papandreou, & Birbili, 2016; Pianta, 2006), there are emerging schemes of professional development that promote concepts where social, cognitive, and practical involvement co-exist and are co-dependent (Day, 2004). For example, the combination of various training methodologies such as lectures, workshops, small-group project work, supervised practice in ECEC settings, and collective analyses of practices has been found to create appropriate interplay between theory and practice and is apparently a critical factor for effective professional development programs (European Commission Thematic Group on ECEC Quality, 2014). In another seminal review (Eurofound, 2015), it was concluded that the most successful types of CPD interventions in terms of improving ECEC quality are those that are integrated into the ECEC center's practice and focus on reflecting educators' practices. In other words, in order to achieve a stable

connection between high-quality ECEC and workforces' professional development, CPD programs must provide modern early childhood educators with opportunities to reflect on their work, to evaluate it, and to adapt accordingly (OECD, 2014).

2.2.3 In Pursuit of ECEC Quality

The European Union's ultimate goal for ECEC seems to be to ensure that all young children have access to and benefit from high-quality education and care (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice/Eurostat, 2014). However, despite the fact that the EU is a global leader in providing ECEC services, more efforts are required to increase the quality and accessibility of provision in all member states (Eurofound, 2015; NESSE, 2009).

> Moving beyond the simple insight that "ECEC matters," there is a growing recognition that the magnitude of the benefits of ECEC for children's future learning, cognitive and non-cognitive development depends on "quality." Furthermore, it is being acknowledged that many of the benefits may be lost unless the gains from quality ECEC are being sustained by quality primary schooling, especially in the earliest years. (OECD, 2015, p. 20)

In recent years the notion of quality has held a central position and seems to be dominating all of the EU's educational policies and interventions. This development is somehow expected, as much of the benefit of ECEC is highly dependent on "quality" (OECD, 2012a). However, in pursuing high-quality ECEC stakeholders, both at an EU and a member state level, face some very serious challenges, with the most important being the effort to reach a consensus about how quality ECEC should be defined, what are its basic features, and how is it best measured or monitored.

ECEC settings are exceptionally varied across the member states, including kindergartens, crèches, child care centers, and family day care facilities, and the attempts to monitor quality and to adopt common policies are as diverse and challenging as the provision of ECEC itself (OECD, 2015). More importantly, this diversity extends to the concept of quality ECEC itself and the lack of consensus among researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers regarding a common definition of

quality ECEC and a generally accepted way to measure it. The debate about the concept of "quality" is not new; on the contrary it has been going on among researchers for years (Sylva & EPPE Team, 2010b).

Even from a brief literature review, one can conclude that there are two dominant lines of scholarly argument about defining and measuring the quality of ECEC. The first approach includes attributing of a set of solid measurable characteristics to quality ECEC (Soucacou & Sylva, 2010), a rather global approach to what constitutes quality and the use of global ratings scales (e.g., ECERS-R, ECERS-E, CLASS) to measure it. Dalli (2014, p. 1) suggests that this approach reflects the modernist paradigm (Campbell-Barr, 2016), "using multi-level modelling and statistical analysis to untangle the impact of various childcare variables on child outcomes." The second approach includes a more culturally oriented methodology that attributes different characteristics to the concept of quality ECEC at a local or country level, depending on the cultural context in which it is being measured. The latter is "a critical, philosophical and multi-perspectival debate about the meaning of quality" (Dalli, 2014, p. 1). It reflects a poststructuralist approach, where quality acquires its meaning and interpretation based on information gleaned from different peoples and cultures (Campbell-Barr, 2016).

However, this debate about quality ECEC is not without any common ground. A positive step that indicates that common trends are emerging is the OECD's Starting Strong III Report (2012a), which identifies five areas of quality that can be leveraged by policies for improved child development: (1) quality goals and minimum standards, (2) curriculum and learning standards, (3) workforce quality, (4) family and community engagement, and (5) data, research, and monitoring. The debate about the definition and interpretation of the concept of quality ECEC is a complex and ongoing matter, which is discussed in detail in Chap. 3.

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http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-64211-6

Professional Development and Quality in Early Childhood Education
Comparative European Perspectives
Gregoriadis, A.; Grammatikopoulos, V.; Zachopoulou, E. (Eds.)
2018, XV, 145 p., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-3-319-64211-6