

**DRAGANA PAVLOVIĆ BRENESELOVIĆ****EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE (ECEC) QUALITY STANDARDS IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND AND THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA: TWO DISCOURSES OF QUALITY****Abstract**

The paper provides a comparative analysis of establishing quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) in the Republic of Ireland and the Republic of Serbia. The analysis is done through desk research of documents dealing with the standards of quality. The following dimensions were compared: 1) The way of preparing and adopting documents; 2) The function of standards; 3) Structure and content of the documents; 4) Evaluation of quality. The comparison of understanding and the purpose of ECEC standards in the two countries has shown the difference between the discourse of building quality and discourse of quality assurance by standardization as the external measure of quality. Whilst in Ireland, the evaluation of the quality is seen as the process of re-consideration and building quality, in Serbia, this is a one off 'act' of measuring and control.

Key words: discourses of quality, early childhood education and care, standards of quality

**Introduction**

The issue of quality of education has been in focus for preschool education policies and practices for at least two previous decades (European Commission..., 1996; Bennett, 2008; Working Group on ECEC..., 2014; OECD, 2006). Establishing quality by standardization has undoubtedly been the dominant approach, not only in early childhood education. Since quality is not a monosemic, uniform concept, the meaning of standards is also defined differently due to the different understandings of their nature, purpose and function. Such differences ensue from the differences in the approach to quality. The analysis of theoretical approaches, education policies and practices has shown the two dominant discourses of quality: quality assurance and quality building discourses (Krnjaja & Pavlović Breneselović, 2013).

Quality assurance discourse is based on the understanding of education practice as a rigid or deterministic system which can be regulated by input control. It is also underpinned by positivist theory which sees quality as something tangible and measurable that can be perceived, examined and measured. Quality is something objective, independent of our values. The knowledge on quality is obtained by quantitative measurements, assessment scales, correlation studies, experiments and quasi-experiments. The empirical research provides data and articulate theories and postulates on quality which are infused in practice by standardization (Fenech et al., 2008).

Quality building discourse is based on postmodern systemic approach and socio-cultural theoretical orientation. It recognizes education system practice as a complex and purposeful system based on values – as “purpose seeking” system (Banathy, 1991). A quality is socially and culturally determined concept and thereby

it is contextual and dynamic, subjective, pluralistic, multi-perspective and values underpinned. Quality requires continuous monitoring and reconsideration which never reaches a final “objective” definition (European Commission..., 1996). According to Dahlberg and associates (Dahlberg et al., 2007) quality is based on the evaluation in a participatory interpretative process involving dialogue and argumentation. This evaluation is a theme of the participants’ reflexion in a given context related to the key issues of preschool education: what constitutes our picture of children, what do we aim for in children’s education (Urban, 2015).

## Analysis and Discussion

The goal of our research has been to find out the differences in the meaning of the quality standards by the comparative analysis of establishing quality in the Republic of Ireland and Serbia. We have compared those two practices by analysing the official webpages and documents of education policy dealing with ECEC quality. The main analysed documents were *The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education – SIOLTA*<sup>1</sup> in Republic of Ireland (CECDE, 2006) and *Quality Standards of Preschool Settings in Serbia* (MPNTR, 2012). The following dimensions were compared: 1) Document development; 2) Function of standards; 3) Structure and content of the documents; 4) Evaluation of quality.

*Document development.* The document *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education – SIOLTA* was developed by The Centre for Education and Development in Early Childhood (CEDEC) on behalf of the Irish Department of Education and Skills (Duignan et al., 2007). The document development was preceded by the several researches on theory and practice of ECEC in the Republic of Ireland and other countries. The research results were presented in the four publications: results of research on the different perspectives on quality (children, parents and practitioners) (Duignan & Walsh, 2005); overview of the national policy, practice and research on quality (Duignan & Walsh, 2004); overview of the cross national policies and practices of establishing quality (Schonfeld et al., 2004) and the study on preschool education in Ireland (Fallon, 2005). In addition, the development of the quality framework design has been preceded by a three-year consultation with more than 50 diverse organisations, representing childcare workers, teachers, parents, policy makers, researchers and other interested parties. *National Quality Framework* has been supplemented with the user manuals for the practitioners in all kind of ECEC programmes.

The document *Quality Standards of Preschool Settings in Serbia* (MPNTR, 2012) has been developed in two-year work by the expert group, consisting of the representatives of preschool institutions and professional associations, experts from the Ministry of Education, Institute for the Improvement of Education and from the project IMPRESS (Improvement of ECEC System in Serbia) funded by the EU Commission. No systemic research preceded the development of the document. In the project IMPRESS the guide for the self-evaluation of ECEC settings was produced (Benett et al., 2012). The Proposal of the standards was made available for

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<sup>1</sup> The word *Síolta* means ‘seeds’ in Irish. The word seed is used as a metaphor for the ways in which the framework can be used as a developmental tool, facilitating the growth of each service to their full potential and in their own distinctive way.

a three-month public discussion on the webpage of the Institute for the Improvement of the Education with the possibility to post comments and suggestions. Following the public discussion, no data on its results or the amendments to the Proposal of the standards have been made available. The Standards was adopted by the National Education Council.

There is no special webpage on the standards of quality in Serbia. The document itself is available on the National Education Council webpage while the information on the process of document development is available on the Institute for the Improvement of Education webpage. None of the webpages give any additional information, resources or publications supplementing the standards.

*Differences in the function of standards.* *Siolta* functions are: 1) to recognize valuable aspects of practice and to identify those aspects that need to be improved; 2) to encourage practitioners to re-consider and reflect on the different aspects of their practice individually or in teams. *Siolta* is process oriented. The essence of both functions is to promote the reflexive practice in which *Siolta* is seen as the mean for the continuous development of the quality practice.

The function of the *Standards* in Serbia is to 'enable equal and objective assessments of the ECEC settings practice and contribute to the quality, consistent and efficient application of legislative demands' (Pravilnik..., 2012, p. 2).

*Differences in structure and content.* *Siolta* is comprised of three interrelated elements: Principles, Standards and Components of Quality. The 12 Principles provide the overall vision of the Framework. Sixteen inter-connected standards 'translate' the vision expressed in principles into the reality of the practice. There is an explanation for each standard including a brief overview of research that can support and extend understanding of standard. They link each standard to the overall theme of quality in early childhood care and education (ECCE) and offer practical suggestions about how that research evidence can be used to promote and develop quality in everyday practice. The standards are additionally concretised by 75 components. The components are further explained by a set of Signposts for Reflection and 'Think-about's' which are intended to support practitioners in early education settings to become aware of and critical of their practice. The purpose is to encourage practitioners to initiate discussions relevant to their practice. The practitioners may use these guidelines for individual reconsideration or for the analyses in the context of the practice within the group and/or professional networks.

The Standards of quality in Serbia have 7 evaluation areas, 27 standards and 133 indicators. The document defines standards as 'the statements on the quality practice or the conditions for realising the practice'. The indicators are, operationalised definitions used to measure the achievement of standards (Pravilnik..., 2012). The document does not give the starting points or principles for setting the standards, while the values of the preschool education from which the standards originate remain unclear. *Siolta* standards of quality cover different areas of preschool education ensuing from the principles, while in the Standards of quality in Serbia the criteria of dividing the practice to which standards apply, are not clear so they do not cover the entirety of the kindergarten practice. For example, there is not a single standard on the evaluation at the institution level. The evaluation is indirectly mentioned in Standard 6 'Work organisation and management' which outlines the principal's role in taking actions and measures to improve the educational work and

in the indicator 6.4.6. – ‘Self-evaluation team continually conducts the self-evaluation of the institution’s work’ (MPNTR, 2012, p. 7).

Contrary to this, Siolta Standard 8 refers to planning and evaluation and has the three indicators: 1) The practice is re-considered in the cyclic process of assessment, planning, action and evaluation; 2) Re-consideration is based on the established structure of documenting; 3) There are mechanisms ensuring that the re-consideration process leads to changes in the practice – the outcomes of re-consideration reflected in the change of practice are documented, stored and used for the exchange of experience with others (CECD, 2006). Each indicator is given with two or three guidelines for the reflexion and each guidance for the reflexion suggests 8-9 topics for the practitioners to contemplate and reflect on.

*Evaluation of the quality.* Siolta, as the program of the development of quality can be implemented informally and formally. In informal implementations, all practitioners have materials necessary for Siolta and use them as guidelines to improve practice in their institutions. The development of quality is based on the practitioners’ self-monitoring and self-evaluation. The institutions start the formal implementation of Siolta by voluntary application for getting the sign ‘Quality in Education’ which assumes the development process of building the quality. The goal of evaluating the quality is to develop the network of preschool education quality through the process oriented to re-consideration and revision of the ways of monitoring the quality; development of ancillary supporting materials; encouragement of research with children and parents; raising the public awareness on the importance of preschool education. The evaluation of quality is based on the evaluations of the development of quality done by the participants in the kindergarten practice and Siolta coordinators. Coordinators work with practitioners on the development of quality by helping them to identify difficulties and improve practice. The evaluation of quality underlines the importance of: 1) Multifaceted perspectives of evaluation; 2) Equal importance of internal and external evaluation; 3) Equal importance of summative and normative evaluation; 4) Validity, reliability and fairness are strengthened by openness and transparency. The evaluation of quality is done in several phases: registration; evaluation of the current state of practice; planning actions. A plan containing the description of actions and their schedule is made by the practitioners with the coordinator’s assistance. The period between the registration and the verification of the quality lasts about eighteen months. It is expected that, during this period, the institution participates in and undertakes a number of the development activities to achieve the standards, revise the programs and develop the reflexive practice. When the institution feels that it is ready for verification, they invite the evaluator who, together with practitioners, prepares two kinds of reports: summative and narrative. The narrative report includes guidelines for further development. The institution can get the sign of quality in education (minimum rating 2 out of 4) or, if it assesses that its work on the achievement of standards has not been successful enough it can re-open the process of support for the quality.

In Serbia, the Standards of quality are the basis for the self-evaluation and external evaluation of the early childhood setting. These two processes are entirely separate. Self-evaluation of the quality is *the institution obligation* which has to be done annually for the selected area of standards and once each five years for all

standards. Self-evaluation is led by the institution's self-evaluation team on the basis of the annual self-evaluation plan and the stipulated sources of data. External evaluation of quality of the work of the ECEC setting is carried out by the Ministry of Education and the Institute for the Evaluation of Quality professional pedagogical inspectors. The evaluators spend a week in the setting and prepare an expert report which contains the quantitative assessment of quality and instructions for further work.

## Conclusions

The comparison of understanding and the purpose of the ECEC quality standards in the Republic of Ireland and Serbia shows the differences between the systemic approach to quality in the discourse of building quality and the discourse of quality assurance through standards as a tool for evaluation. The comparative analysis of the two models of evaluating quality shows the substantial differences in the approaches. In Ireland, the evaluation of the quality is a process of quality development, whilst in Serbia it is the one-off 'act' of the assessment of quality.

Given different approaches to the areas and functions of standardization, the ways of setting and presenting the principles and standards in the document structure and content, we may conclude that *Siolta* represents a vision of supporting the quality practice and the guide for building quality. Evaluation is not a system of control but a system connecting interests through dialogue and common meaning. It is a system establishing a mutual support and bridge between the national curriculum framework and actual practice (Urban, 2015). The emphasis is on the reflexive practitioners, their professional autonomy while the children and the family are the participants in the process of building quality.

The standards of quality in Serbia are an external set of regulations. The practice is regulated and controlled by setting the standards, monitoring and evaluating them. The practitioners are placed in the position of 'objects' of external expertise whilst the children and families have the status of consumers. Such an approach brings us away from the understanding of quality given in the most recent EU document on the quality of preschool education which states that 'quality is a relative concept based on values and beliefs, and defining quality should be a dynamic, continuous and democratic process. A balance needs to be found between defining certain common objectives, applying them to all services, and supporting diversity between individual services' (Working Group..., 2015, p. 8). This suggests the need for transformation of preschool education. This transformation should start by the explicit stating of the values underpinning preschool education: what do we believe in regard to the child and his/her learning and what role does the society, family and practitioners have in this?

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