IMPROVING QUALITY: REGISTRATION AND SUPPORT OF CHILDMINDERS

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Introduction

In this paper three essential quality inputs which need to be established for the registration of childminders are considered. The three inputs are: structural inputs, safety measures, and community support. Indicators for structural inputs are space per child, staff-child ratio and the number of children. Indicators for safety measures include absence of hazards indoors and outdoors, level of security, and supervision. For community support the indicators relating to the importance of support and the quality of community relationships have been selected. These indicators are subsequently described and their importance in the registration process is highlighted. The data used in this paper were collected from 147 childminders (the whole population of childminders looking after four or more children) in the national Childminding Study carried out in 2013 with the aim of establishing the status of the Childminding Programme in Seychelles.

The results in this paper are disaggregated by region to provide a national perspective of the Childminding Programme in Seychelles as part of the provision for ECCE. It is anticipated that regional comparison will help to make decisions regarding the registration process.

Background

In Seychelles ECCE Programme for children 0-3 is fee-paying and provided by private individuals in Day Care Centres or Childminding Services. Whilst Day Care Centres are required to be registered with the Ministry of Education, to follow the guidelines for infrastructural, material and human resources, and are inspected (Ministry of Education, 2005), Childminding Services have developed in a more traditional way in diverse home environment and are not required to be registered with any particular body.

Findings from international research have shown that the quality of ECCE programme is the most consistent factor influencing children's development. This has led many countries such as Sweden, Singapore and UK to place considerable emphasis on the promotion of ECCE for children in the 0-3 age group. The Government of Seychelles has also been concerned with the provisions available for the 0-3 and expressed its dissatisfaction with the high number of children in that age group who were in other "parallel services" (that is not in "Day Care Centres" most of which (including childminding services) were not "managed by any official organization" (Ministry of Finance, 2008). In the Second Biennial ECCE Conference (2013) emphasis was placed on achievements in the provision of care and early learning experiences and Ms. Mona Tan from the SEED Institute in Singapore reported on the new drive in Singapore to develop and improve early childhood centres. From the Seychelles Country Report produced by the World Bank on ECD (2013) specific recommendations were made on the need to improve service delivery in childminding facilities and to register childminders.

In considering the registration of childminders thought must be given to the history of childminding and the importance of that service in the community. Childminding has developed in an informal manner and as a means of self employment. The aim of registering childminding is first of all to improve ECCE programme for 0-3 and to support childminders in delivering quality service. Thus indicators have been

selected to provide information on the quality of inputs to the childminding service, particularly, the indoor space, staffing situation, safety measures, number of children, and source of support. The Childminding Study which attempted to capture the whole of the childminding population and to collect data through observation and questionnaire was particularly designed to assess conditions in childminding establishments and to monitor the quality of available support to childminders. For the purpose of this paper twelve indicators have been specifically selected to assist in setting minimum requirements for the registration of Childminders and in initiating supporting structures as part of the drive to improve the quality of the Childminding Programme.

Selected Indicators

Twelve indicators to assess the quality of the Childminding Programme are described under three main categories: structural inputs, safety measures and institutional support. These are considered to be fundamental requirements for the initial regulation of the delivery of childminding services and the phased implementation of support mechanisms.

Structural inputs include indoor space, staff-child ratio, and the number of children. Too many children will reduce the quality of the programme whilst the number of children being catered for has to match infrastructural arrangements. Originally, children could be accommodated comfortably within the family structure of the home. However as the childminding services expanded, and with the growing need of employment for women, childminders have invested in extending or building specific facilities for the sole purpose of childminding. This obviously has changed somewhat the home-based childminding environment. Nevertheless, children need space for play-based activities, free movement and rest periods. A comfortable main indoor area for the number of children is essential for children's development. At the same time, an agreeable ratio of adult to child is necessary for quality interaction and supervision.

Table1: Quality Inputs to Childminding Operations

	Structural Inputs			Level of safety			Institutional Support				
	space ratio child per m²	adult to child ratio	Number of children	No safety hazards indoor	Outdoor area safe & secure	Diligent supervision at all times	Importance Support by authorities	Community relationship – District Administrators	Community relationship – Health Officers	Community relationship – Social Workers	Community relationship – Community Nurse
Region	Mean	Mean	Mean	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Central 1	1:2.9	1:7.3	10.3	44.4	21.4	75.0	91.7	56.0	20.8	29.2	29.2
Central 2	1:2.8	1:5.5	7.3	70.4	40.7	85.2	95.8	50.0	43.5	20.8	25.0
East/South	1:2.9	1:5.6	7.1	61.8	35.3	77.1	85.7	57.1	25.7	48.6	62.9
Islands	1:2.9	1:6.4	8.2	42.3	18.2	84.6	92.0	47.1	38.5	32.0	38.5
North	1:3.5	1:4.7	6.4	69.2	25.0	84.6	93.3	33.3	33.3	26.7	46.7
West	1:2.8	1:5.7	7.3	42.1	05.3	73.7	100.0	42.1	50.0	05.6	50.0
National	1:3.2	1:5.9	7.8	54.8	26.1	79.7	92.2	49.6	34.0	29.8	43.0

Safety is crucial for a childminding operation. The childminder must provide a safe environment for children's well-being and to prevent injuries. Both the indoor and outdoor area should not poise any potential safety problems for the children and these areas need to be organized in such a way that hazardous objects are removed or secured. Moreover, there must be adequate supervision both indoors and outdoors at all times. Three main safety indicators have been selected: absence of safety hazards indoors, a safe and secure outdoor area, and diligent supervision.

As it was pointed out above, childminders operate in diverse home conditions and in registering childminders it will be necessary to develop institutional and community support for them to achieve the necessary minimum standards, improve the services that they are offering, and build a network of professionals to give specific help to childminders and even participate in small childminding projects. The importance of support by relevant authorities rated by childminders have been used as an indicator to capture the perspective of the childminder; the quality of the relationship between the childminder and key community and institutional professional workers have been used as proxy indicators to tap into potential sources of support. The supporting links between District Administrators, professionals from health and social services need to be nurtured and activities such as visits to childminders to discuss childcare needs and options, projects to support child development in childminding establishments, schemes to promote childminding as a community service must be considered.

Key Findings

Data collected for the selected indicators have been analysed and the results have been presented in the Table 1 below. In order to discuss particular standards, international comparisons have been introduced for possible benchmarking.

Structural Inputs

Minimum standards are set for structural quality indicators such as the indoor space, staff–child ratio, number of children, and they vary from country to country. For example, across OECD countries (Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation) in child care settings, the average space per child and the child-staff ratio is 1: 3.6 m^2 and 1:7, respectively (OECD, 2011).

Space per child
It can be seen in Table 1 that the national average is about 1:3m^2 per child with very little variation between regions. However, in order to reach a set standard for Seychelles, it may be necessary to look at the standards for Day Care Centres (Ministry of Education 2005) where the average recommended ratio is about 2m^2. Thus, our results compare favourably with the indoor space requirements for care centres in OECD countries and for Day Care Centres in Seychelles.

Staff-child ratio
The ratio of adult to children varies from country to country. Generally it is recommended (in UK, for example) that there should be 1 adult to every 6 children. This accounts for diligent supervision and quality interaction. The average staff-child ratio as depicted in Table 1 is about 1:6. Again this compares well with requirements across OECD countries where it is stipulated that 'a child care staff member can have only seven children at most in a child care centre'. Again if we are to consider the situation in Day Care Centres in Seychelles, it can be noted the Ministry of Education recommends the optimum number of staff as "one adult for every 4-9 children".

Number of children
In column three (Table 1) the average number of children enrolled in childminding establishments has been presented. It can be seen that the national average nationally is about eight, with the largest figure (about 10) in Central 1 area and the lowest (about 6) in the North. It is understandable that the childminding service is most needed in the central area and it is the area with the larger number of children in childminding establishments. It has been noted from further analysis that there were five

childminders with enrolment of 20 or more children (3 in Central 1, 1 in Central 2 and 1 in East/South region.

In many countries, UK is one example, it has been stipulated that in home-based childminding operation there should be no more than 6 children and in those six children there should only one child below the age of 1. In Seychelles in 2007, regulation from SEnPA advocated five children for a childminder. However this only applied to those childminders registered with SEnPA(16childminders in this study) to obtain a loan as a small business. However, with more and more childminders extending their services (At the time of the study 60% of chlidminders had renovated a verandah or had built a designated space for childminding) and there has been a tendency for childminders to take on more children – mainly due to demands and for financial reasons. From our analysis, and in our local context, it seems prudent to consider the number of children in relation to the average space and staff ratio.

Level of Safety

The three indicators used are based on observational data of items in the indoor space that may cause health and safety risks on the absence of hazards in the outdoor space and on the overall supervision of the children. The indicator for indoor space in Table 1 reveals that for Seychelles as a whole, for about half of the childminders, there were safety risks in their indoor areas – the situation was worst in Islands and West regions (40% without safety risks) and better in Central 2 (70% without safety risks). However, for indicators relating to outdoor hazards, only one-quarter of the childminder population had outdoor spaces which were judged as safe and secure. Nevertheless, the level of supervision was quite high with almost 80 percent of childminders providing diligent supervision at all times. The general impression that is created from these findings is that much needs to be done to improve the outdoor environment where children were being minded, that perhaps many childminders were not aware of safety risks indoor and that minimum standards will need to be set for those aspects, and that childminders will need training and support to ensure that the childminding environment is safe and secure.

Support

The support indicators are from the perspective of the childminders and include the importance of support for them and the relationship they have with professional community and care workers. It is clear from the results recorded in the eighth column of Table 1 that the majority of childminders said that support was very important for them. This is very much confirmed by the qualitative data during various discussion sessions with childminders: Childminders felt that they did not have a voice and that they have been neglected by the authorities. It is not surprising that relationship with professional workers was limited. Only about one-third of childminders admitted to having a working relationship with Health Officers (around 34%) and Social Workers (about 30%). The relationship with the Community Nurse and the District Administrator was somewhat better with recorded figures of 40 and 49 percent, respectively. These results are rather disappointing since the childminding service is being delivered in the community and positive relationship is the basis for developing support groups. It may be necessary as part of the registration process to exploit the personal relationship potential between childminders and caring and community workers to build support structures for childminders.

Summary of Findings

■ The results from this study show that the child-space and child adult ratio are consistent with international benchmark. However, there were five childminders operating well outside this benchmark with a large number of children. They were from the Central 1, Central 2 and West regions.

■ Although the level of supervision was commendable, the safety provision was worrying since about half of childminding establishments had safety hazards indoors and one-quarter of childminder were operating in hazardous outdoor conditions.

■ The relationship between the childminders and health, community and social workers were poor or very poor in all the regions. However, the majority of childminders rated support from relevant authorities as very important for the quality of the service they were providing.

Recommendations

1. Establish minimum requirements of 2m^2 per child for child-space ratio for indoor areas and 1: 6 for child-adult ratio.
2. Establish staffing requirement for an assistant or assistants for more than 6 children.
3. Develop transition strategies for childminding establishments, not conforming to the stated requirements, to register as Day Care Centres.
4. Design and implement outdoor improvement projects particularly in the West and Island regions.
5. Identify alternative common outdoor play and green areas through the Department of Community Development and Sports for childminders with limited outdoor space.
6. De-centralise specialized outdoor facilities(such as the Baby Gym) for the 0-3 age group.
7. Expand the role of community authorities and professionals to include support provisions to childminding services.

Conclusion

In this paper three basic categories of indicators of quality for the registration of childminders were examined: structural inputs, safety measures and source of support. It was found that although

childminders in Seychelles were operating well within international norms in terms of structural inputs, some work needs to be done with some childminding operations to meet the necessary standards. With regards to the safety measures it was found that both the indoor space and especially the outdoor areas would need attention. Moreover, community and institutional relationship need to be developed to support childminders.

The main purpose of registration is to improve childminding services, to enhance the quality of ECCE and to support childminders. Attention to the three essential areas as outlined in this brief are necessary in the registration process to ensure that children are protected, cared for in suitable environment and that the community, health and social authorities are aware and involved in the provision of the Childminding Programme.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EFL	Education for Life
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SEnPA	Small Enterprise Promotion Agency

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