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EDITED BY

Linda Joan Harrison,
Macquarie University, Australia

REVIEWED BY

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Monash University, Australia
Christine Woodrow,
Western Sydney University, Australia
Jennifer Skattebol,
University of New South Wales, Australia

*CORRESPONDENCE

Susan Grieshaber
✉ s.grieshaber@latrobe.edu.au

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Complexifying quality: educator examples

Susan Grieshaber* and Elise Hunkin

School of Education, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Quality in early childhood education settings has dominated the global economic policy agenda since the early 1990s, and despite decades of public investment, quality reform has stalled in Australia and internationally. This lack of quality improvement has been attributed to the inadequacy of the standardized, quantitative, and economic perspectives that drive policy, which are increasingly focused on systematized, academic interpretations of quality. The most impactful dimensions of quality are interpersonal and include warm, frequent interactions and rich, responsive play-based environments. However, little is known about these dimensions of quality and research is urgently needed. This paper reports initial data from a small-scale project investigating educator- and pre-service teacher-participant responses to prompts from researchers about what constitutes quality, including 'in the moment' experiences. Participants posted responses to researcher prompts to an online platform. Educator and pre-service teacher perspectives about their experiences of what constitutes quality provide a novel alternative to dominant discourses. Identifying some of the more complex dimensions of quality from the experiences of educators and pre-service teachers may reveal insight into previously untapped and difficult to access tacit knowledge.

KEYWORDS

early childhood education, complexity, quality ecologies, critical, digital ethnography

Introduction

Quality early childhood education can protect against disadvantage, establish positive life paths, and return public investment at a higher rate than any other stage of life (Heckman, 2000). This study explores an alternative methodology to generate new insights into quality in early childhood education as lived, every-day experience. The data will be used to develop a theory of quality ecologies (Authors, under review), opening alternative ways of thinking about and supporting quality pertaining to practice, policy, and budgeting.

Decades of state investment to improve quality has not produced the desired results. Based on key measures like the number of services meeting standards and social equity, quality improvement has stalled in Australia (see Hughes, 2021) and globally (Urban and Rubiano, 2014). Researchers attribute this lack of improvement to the inadequacy of the standardized, quantitative, and economic perspectives that drive policy (Penn, 2011; Roberts-Homes and Moss, 2021), which are increasingly focused on standardized, academic interpretations of quality (Grieshaber and Ryan, 2018; Hunkin, 2021). These interpretations of quality often call for attention to interpersonal relationships and contextual nuances (see OECD, 2018; Garcia et al., 2020). However, the embedded positivist paradigm limits how well complex views of quality can be conceptualized and represented, and tells only a partial story.

Existing studies of daily experiences and quality interactions typically rely on researcher observation (Henry et al., 2021), with or without the application of rating tools like the

Classroom Assessment Scoring System – Toddler (CLASS-T; La Paro et al., 2012) or CLASS - Infant (CLASS-I; Hamre et al., 2014) or the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R; Harms et al., 1998), due to the logistical difficulties of representing and evaluating such phenomena (Penn, 2011; Moss, 2014). Therefore, data are much needed that capture complex and contextual, multi-perspectival evidence of quality *as it is lived and co-constructed* in ECEC settings [Logan and Sumsion, 2010; Cloney et al., 2013; World Bank Group (WBG), 2016], as well as a theoretical frame through which to understand and apply these perspectives.

To date, research that seeks educator or other stakeholder perspectives of what constitutes quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings is sparse and small in scale. In the USA, Hedges (2015) interviewed three educators and three parents in Head Start, Steiner, and Reggio Emilia aligned services respectively, and found that the service philosophy strongly informed educator perspectives of quality (p. 18). From the data set, four key themes emerged about educator foci for quality: relationships with families; school readiness; social and emotional development, and respecting children (p. 23). A Japanese study of six educators highlighted a shared perception that happiness was the highest priority when programming for quality (Ikegami and Agbenyega, 2014).

In Australia, Togher and Fenech (2020) engaged with five educators in ECEC services that had been rated as ‘Working Towards’ (not yet meeting) the national legislative quality standard to understand whether educator perspectives of quality were aligned with the quality rating of their service. Those who felt that the rating was not fair noted the lack of attention from assessors to the context-specific work that was being undertaken (p. 246). The importance of educator capacity was highlighted, specifically between Bachelor and Diploma qualified educators who are in principle evaluated according to the same standard (p. 258). Ten years prior, Australian researchers Logan and Sumsion (2010) had discussed with six educators what quality meant to them and their service, noting that the educators found this a difficult task:

Given the lack of alternative languages in the existing regulatory environment, it is not surprising that the participants in this study struggled to articulate their understandings of quality. (p. 45)

Nevertheless, shared perspectives of quality as fluid, contextual and personal, as well as interconnected to its multiple contributors, were highlighted. In another Australian study, Hutchins et al. (2009) remarked about the lack of fit between Australian Indigenous perspectives of quality that favor relationships, time, family, children’s learning, and communicating; and the linearity and bureaucracy that characterize ways of conceptualizing quality assurance in Australia. They also talked about the importance of actively involving the community about all matters related to quality. We seek to build on aspects that characterize Australian Indigenous perspectives concerning quality (Hutchins et al.), as well as Logan and Sumsion’s (2010) suggestion of the need for ‘alternative languages’ and interconnections as part of positing a theory of quality ecologies and associated methodological implications. We are also interested in exploring what de Bruin and Harris (2017) call a “field of relationships” or a “joined-up approach to the *interconnections between place, space, and practices*” (p. 30, our italics). As part of this we are seeking possibilities for identifying what might seem to be unlikely and/or unanticipated connections.

This research is nested in a two-year (mid 2022-mid 2024) Early Childhood Professional Practice Partnerships Grant funded by the Victoria (Australia) Department of Education (DE). The project forms part of DE initiatives concerning workforce training, attraction and retention, part of which is establishing strong relationships between DE, universities, ECEC service providers, and initial teacher education (ITE) students through the development of effective partnership models. Aims include establishing strong and sustainable partnerships to deliver quality placement experiences for students; increased support for ECEC services to provide effective and high-quality placements; improved preparation to enter the profession by exposing students to leading professional practice, curriculum planning and team teaching, and better integration of theory with practice; and improving early childhood ITE through strengthened partnerships between ITE providers, service providers and students. Maximizing the exposure of students to service environments and providing quality service-based placements is anticipated to increase the perceived intrinsic value of early childhood teaching careers. There is also an expectation that a shared service provider-university research perspective of evidence-based, high-quality environments and practices in ITE and ECEC settings will develop.

The project is led by the research team and a site director, who is involved with project partners and students daily. During each semester in which placement occurs, the project involves enhanced on-campus experiences for students; mentoring for students and mentor teachers; professional learning for mentor teachers and service leaders working with students; high quality placement experiences (services involved were rated as Exceeding the Australian National Quality Standard), and strengthening partnerships among DE, La Trobe University, partner services, and the ECEC sector. The research question framing the project is: What constitutes quality in early childhood contexts for educators and pre-service teachers experiencing and co-creating quality in these settings? Given the emphasis on the ‘what’ of quality in process and structural accounts, we are interested in the ‘how’ (Harris and Rousell, 2022), rather than the ‘what’ of quality. The ‘how’ also encompasses the ‘when’ aspects of quality.

Methodology

The research design is a critical, digital, short-term ethnography that aims to gather nuanced insights concerning the ‘how/when’ of quality at specific times and places from firsthand experiences of educators and students. Ethical approval was granted by the DE and La Trobe University. The critical aspect of the design is informed by a developing theory of quality ecologies, which is an initial attempt to theorise the complexity of quality and experiment with that richness (Authors, under review). Web-based digital data collection tools have been used in marketing since their emergence, but the application of these tools to education research remains novel (Pink, 2012). Digital ethnography platforms allow researchers to gather data about phenomena as it occurs ‘in place’ without inserting themselves into that place (Pink, 2012). Such platforms have added value in the COVID era, as well as in Australian early childhood settings, which are diverse in type and location, and which have additional access and safety challenges due to the presence of children on site. This study utilizes a digital ethnography platform developed by sociologists that

is accessed through participant login, via digital phone or tablet.¹ The platform was trialed successfully on a small scale by the second author in 2021. Data are stored in the cloud by the platform for the duration of the platform contract. Once the contract and site expire all data are removed, and no data are retained or sold.

The short-term aspect of the ethnography draws on three ideas from Pink and Morgan (2013). First, the digital platform is conceptualized as an “ethnographic place” (Pink, 2009) and contextually as part of the ecologies of the larger project. Different perspectives come together digitally from persons, spaces, and temporalities in a process of identifying ethnographically ways of knowing, being, and doing quality. This participatory nature enables data to be uploaded independently in a variety of modes including photos, audio, text, and/or video using a smart phone or tablet (via a login). Visual tools might help to better understand embodied, interpersonal, or people-and-thing relationships concerning quality. Second, research activities are undertaken at several points in short intensive periods (3–4 weeks). Participation is voluntary and has no bearing on involvement in the larger project. Third, is a close and intentional focus on the detail of everyday practices, which aims to prompt the emergence of everyday and perhaps unnoticed and intangible dimensions of ‘quality’ as research knowledge.

Phase 1 of data generation invited participants to respond to provocations called ‘activities’ that appeared on the platform three times per week for up to 4 weeks. The online prompts supported participants to reflect deeply on their experiences of quality and the pedagogies and/or dimensions in which those experiences were embedded. The research team created these activities and encouraged completion via the alert system built into the platform. Responding to activities takes approximately 5–10 min per activity or up to half an hour per week and can be done asynchronously and anonymously at a time that is convenient to each participant. Any identifying information captured by video or photo is blurred by the research team prior to consignment to data analysis. Phase 2 involves focus group discussions where respondents self-elect to participate, and insights from Phase 1 data are explored through critical reflection. Preliminary data from Phase 1 are reported here.

Data is de-identified as needed (e.g., weekly) and exported to CloudStor for access by the research team. The digital platform allows researchers to group and code data including whether participants are educators or students, as well as access NVivo qualitative software for more sophisticated analyses. Thematic and content analysis will inform Phase 2. The digital platform allows participant numbers to grow without putting pressure on research team resources. The sample size is flexible and can adjust to accommodate participant interest. The preliminary data reported here are drawn from 11 participants: five early childhood educators and six students. The number of participants was affected by recent widespread floods in central and northern Victoria, curtailing some placement experiences and service participation. These initial digital responses generated nuanced, multi-perspectival insights into what quality is and does for educators and students co-constructing the phenomena. Initial data reported here are being used to refine approaches for the next iteration of ethnographic data generation in early 2023.

Findings

We present initial data in two clusters related to quality being conceptualized as relationships and connection, and feeling. Two other clusters are not reported. Excerpts from respondents have been extracted from the platform, coded, and clustered. The five educators and six students made a total of 70 responses to the 10 activities.

Quality as relationships and connection

Relationships are key to what respondents identified as what ‘quality’ and ‘high quality’ mean. They involve children, families, stakeholders, and communities; and characteristics such as reciprocity, respect, and diversity. Of the 11 responses to the first activity (*What is quality?*), 10 specifically named ‘relationships’ and explained what was meant by relationships. For instance, when relationships are built on, and develop from good connections; they can then be extended to the content of the program and community:

I believe that Quality in ECE is connection. Connection with families, educators, stakeholders. If you have a good quality connection you can build on relationships, program content and community development. (Educator 665)

In the following excerpt from a student, while the idea of relationships is foundational, quality means creating a program that reflects the diversity of the families attending the service.

Quality in EC settings is the relationships formed between the center and the families that attend. It is the relationships between the children in the room, and the educators that care for them. It is the respectful relationships formed between the educators and the parents and the families of the children in attendance. Quality is the creation of a program that reflects the diversity of the families that are part of the center community, and these strong relationships formed help to guide this program. (ITE student 691)

Strong relationships are the basis for developing a program that is consultative and to some extent co-created with families.

Another student also framed quality around relationships, and linked relationships to the notion of inclusivity and creating a program that reflects the values and beliefs of the children and families attending.

When I think about quality in ECEC, the first thing that comes to mind is the engagement of children in the program and the relationships formed between educators and the children and their families. Quality in ECEC is devising a program that is inclusive of all children and appeals to their interests. It is also about forming respectful, reciprocal relationships with the children and their families to ensure that the program reflects the values and beliefs of the children in attendance. (ITE student 448)

The second activity (*What does high quality mean?*) produced nine responses, four of which mentioned relationships specifically. Overall, the nine responses were more focused on aspects such as learning environments, pedagogy, resources, interactions, and children’s

¹ www.recollective.com

engagement. Educator comments relating to high quality settings included: "...educators know the routines of individual children, they are active in their interactions with children and are intentional in their actions...When educators do not know something they actively seek to understand" (Educator 665). The educator made three suggestions for assisting understanding and these included talking to the child if possible, discussing with families, and searching for further information through professional reflection. A student referred to pedagogical inquiry when she stated: "When high quality happens you have opportunities to inquire more with children...High quality is taking the time to notice, to be, and develop a sense of place" (047).

Two educators identified the importance of genuine and authentic relationships and the connection to high quality: "A direct effort to include the viewpoints of the families within the center will be evident, through mediums such as QIP [Quality Improvement Program] wall, books for parent feedback, genuine conversations and respectful and meaningful interactions with the children" (Educator 691). Educator 665 stated that "High quality can be identified through relationships between educators, children, families, and the community. You cannot fake relationships." The implication here is that relationships are the fabric of what happens in services, and that relationships are evident in a range of interactions and different ways of communicating.

Quality as feeling

The specific activity prompt about feeling was *How does quality in EC settings feel?* However, feeling was mentioned in responses to other activities such as *What is quality?*; *Can quality be captured in a non-verbal exchange?* and *How will you know if an EC setting is high quality?* Respondents conveyed a sense that quality can be identified through feeling; something that is embodied and exists in conjunction with other sensory information related to markers of quality. Three educators identified the immediacy of feeling something. It might be a feeling of deep engagement through supporting children's interests: "I think about the feeling you get when you walk into a space - children and staff highly engaged, following the children's lead and inquiring and exploring interests. I think there are strong relationships and respect" (Educator 047). Educator 119 mentioned feeling as an indicator of high quality: "You will know when you walk into a service if it is high quality by the feel you get." Alternatively, a feeling of high quality may be generated from interactions as well as observations and talking to people in the community:

When entering a service you can immediately see or get a sense of feeling from the educators you interact with...the children you come in contact with and from visually observing the children interact with the environment...talking to the community about what they have heard or contact they have had with a service. These relationships need to be strong and genuine to be a high quality. (Educator 665)

Feeling extended to how people feel while in the service: "For all children, families as well as other educators, feeling that they are accepted for who they are" (Educator 444). Two students commented, the first noting that "In a high quality EC setting - all children feel comfortable" (ITE student 115), and the second stating "...quality

should feel like a warm, welcome, uplifting, positive environment that children and families feel connected to" (ITE student 233). Educators echoed these ideas more broadly: "Quality feels like safety and comfort" (Educator 235) and "A quality feel when entering an EC service is being comfortable in the space" (Educator 665). We detect from these responses that 'the feel of' and 'feelings' generated while in services are very important for educators and students, and that positive feelings and comfort are related closely to strong relationships. Other sensory information such as what quality looks and sounds like is also significant.

Discussion

Initial insights suggest that educators and students talk in complex but predictable ways about quality and high quality as it relates to relationships and connection, and feeling. Participants echoed language and concepts which are consistent with existing quality frameworks such as relationships, diversity, connections, respect, warmth, positivity, and feeling safe. There was little evidence of the joy or excitement of in-the-moment 'quality' learning and teaching, or the idea of risk-taking as part of the pursuit of engaged and meaningful learning, even in outdoor settings. Given the dominance of the standardized quality agenda, these conventional responses might have been expected. On initial indications, it appears that the need for alternative languages (Logan and Sumsion, 2010) remains current, which highlights the opportunity to move beyond existing dominant scripts to challenge how quality is currently conceptualized, and to encourage educators to convey impromptu and candid expressions of what everyday lived quality is and can be.

Our interest is how educators and students go about creating or making quality in everyday practices. We are unsure if educators and students consciously consider and explicitly discuss quality as part of everyday work with children and families, mainly because of the busyness of daily life (staff meetings etc. excepted). Quality is not always reflected in verbal interactions and as the responses have indicated, it is highly likely to be present in embodied actions in particular contexts. How educators understand and enact quality then, is likely to be "embodied, sensory, and emplaced" (Pink and Morgan, 2013, p. 358). It is also likely to be about the 'how and when' of quality rather than the 'what' (Authors, under review; see Harris and Rousell, 2022). We are trying to learn about what already exists in, and is created in everyday, ongoing, and taken-for-granted practices of quality that may be invisible because they are routine, and possibly seen as unremarkable because of their mundanity. Stripping away the everyday 'busyness' might help identify connections that are not apparent. And as Pink and Morgan (2013) suggest, we are keeping in mind the "ethnographic-theoretical" dialogue (p. 359), by intertwining data collection and analysis, and bringing theoretical questions into dialogue with the ethnography to create a theory of quality ecologies.

Conclusion

The project includes four more rounds of data collection in 2023 and 2024, including focus group interviews following each cycle where

participants will be encouraged to link feelings to moments when they are engaged with children in learning, and share the 'how and when' of quality. Creating an embodied and emotional vocabulary of quality is a resource the sector can use to legitimate non-standardized expressions of quality. Data will be coded and interpreted to inform the development of a theory of quality ecologies. The aim is to tap into how participants co-create conditions for quality; how quality emerges spontaneously; how it is inspirational; how it is challenging, and how it is routine (Authors, under review).

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because the ethics approvals indicate they are available to research team only. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to s.grieshaber@latrobe.edu.au.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by La Trobe University Ethics Committee and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, State Government of Victoria, Australia. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

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