

Research and the Production of "Worthwhile" Knowledge about Quality in Early Years Education



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ABSTRACT: There has been substantial study of the quality of early years education yet only recently have researchers started to ask questions and take approaches that have some relevance and meaning for practice in early childhood programmes. This paper reviews the ways in which research has shaped our perception of quality in early childhood education and associated limitations. The dominant approach to quality is then explained and some additional comparatively new approaches are identified. At present there is confusion as to what "quality" means due to the emergence of the stakeholder approach in the early 1990s and a more recent postmodernist interpretation (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999). To overcome this, and to increase specificity and relevance, it is suggested that we should look to the different dimensions of the word "quality" instead of regarding quality as a global, one-word-fits-all construct. There are (at least) three different, distinct dimensions of quality in the early childhood field, namely: "standards", "organisational culture/excellence", and "client benefits".

Introduction

For at least two decades much time and money has been spent on researching the inter-related questions of what makes quality early childhood programmes? and how can quality

be improved? A search of just the American ERIC data base from 1980 to 1999 using the key words "quality", "daycare" and "early childhood education" showed 855 documents. However, for all this research our understanding of quality remains fairly woolly. The reason for this may have as much to do with the word "quality" itself as it has to do with how researchers have approached the study of it.

In the literature the word "quality" is broadly used to describe anything from ratios to how teachers interact with children. It is used as a convenient adjective, because it saves thinking of a more precise term and also it has a nice sound to it and gives importance to one's topic of research. When used to describe or label an early childhood programme or an aspect of it the word "quality" gains a certain reverence which makes a claim irrefutable. "Quality" is frequently used in research papers, discussion, and policy documents without appreciation or even an acknowledgment of the concept's complexity and multi-faceted nature. Very rarely today do advertisements and prospectuses for early childhood services not include the word "quality". Moreover there is a noticeable trend towards more government interest and involvement in wanting to influence the provision of quality early childhood education. Concurrently there is also more emphasis on policies and procedures relating to quality criteria and evaluation within early childhood service groups, such as kindergarten associations (Duncan, 1997). But, just what is meant by "quality" is not always clear.

The prevailing over-use of the word "quality" is indicative of three major problems. First is that the problem of knowing exactly what quality means makes it very difficult for people who are not researchers or in positions of power to express alternative viewpoints. For example, parents are thought by researchers to be poor judges of programme quality (Barraclough & Smith, 1996). Cryer and Burchinal (1997, p. 55) write that "the specifics of the dimensions of high quality care may need to be taught to parents before they can assume the role of effective advocates for high quality care that will help to optimize their children's development". Second, the research literature is largely inaccessible to practitioners who do not have at least some background in research methodology at the post-graduate level. Accessible literature is usually watered down summaries, written in the form of what practitioners should know (i.e. prescriptions) rather than inviting dialogue. A third problem is the practice of selective referencing to support the introduction or review of government policies. For example American research on the economic and social costs of not providing "quality" early childhood programmes was conveniently used as a key justification for radical reforms in the structure and funding of early childhood services in New Zealand (Meade, 1988).

Research has tended to back-up or reflect political ideologies and agendas rather than leading to new or challenging ways of thinking. A notable exception though is the work of Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999). These researchers argue very successfully that there are ways other than the "discourse of quality" for looking at what happens in early childhood settings. In New Zealand I sense that we are not yet ready for the kind of vision and movement beyond quality proposed by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence. Yet as policy and research become almost indistinguishable we should put on pause the quality movement in early childhood education to at least consider the influence research has had our thinking and realise the limited value of the concept of quality.

In this paper I set out a practical (straight forward and expeditious) idea for helping to overcome the problems just outlined. What I will propose is that the construct of quality has at least three dimensions when applied to early childhood programmes. Each of these dimensions should be viewed quite separately and not unitarily. New terminology relating to the different dimensions should replace the too all-encompassing elusive "quality" word.

The Influence of Research

The concern about quality in early childhood education and the shape this concern has taken arose primarily out of an acceptance by researchers in the late 1970s and early 1980s that attendance at an early childhood programme may not be harmful to children's development and well-being. Early childhood programmes came to be considered very desirable for children, and essential for children from low socio-economic and minority group backgrounds. Researchers sought to identify programme features that could be manipulated to improve outcomes for children.

Views on quality that exist outside of the psychological child development approach to researching early childhood programmes have had comparatively little influence on how quality early childhood education is viewed today. In recent years business practices and theories on quality have caught the attention of some early childhood groups, such as a New Zealand kindergartens association which became ISO 9000 registered, but have not had the kind of widespread influence on policy and how quality is viewed in the early childhood sector as the psychological literature has had.

As part of developing a discourse of quality the research of the past two decades has promoted certain ideologies. This can be seen by looking closely at the types of research questions asked, sample selection criteria, and recommendations made at the end of articles and research reports that sometimes go beyond the data being reported to making a political statement, such as a call for more funding or for better staff education levels. Researchers have focused on institutional childcare settings for example, whereas family daycare and other alternative settings have largely been ignored. Concern about programmes being privately run has been fostered by research that has sought to identify distinctions between private and public centres. The problem is not so much with the research but with how the research can be generalised to other countries and extrapolated by individuals in positions of influence to support their personal agendas. Problems fundamental to quality in early childhood programmes have gone unrecognised because to treat these seriously would be to challenge the very nature of the early childhood institution as we know it (for example, a service operated by women for women and their children), and as we want it (for example, a service that needs more status and funding and therefore it is believed, without concern for the consequences for children, that a shift from a care to an educational emphasis is wise).

To illustrate this argument that researchers support the discourse of quality and rarely question fundamental problems underpinning the social construction of early childhood education, I would like to share the following section of a summary in a book chapter on quality by Gammage (1994, p. 10):

It (early childhood education) does surely 'compensate' for certain sterilities all too often found in contemporary home life, with its over-reliance on television and passivity. Early childhood education must be of high enough quality to be more than mere child-minding. Teachers should be properly trained alongside other professions; 'care-taker' ratios should be appropriately low. The status of those involved, as well all know, is closely linked to the status of women in a given region. There is still urgent need for reform and development here.

Publication of research has been confined mostly to academic journals. Often reports of findings are masked with statistics. Those teaching the student teachers do not always have the specialist knowledge to be able to help students go beyond learning what the research says is important for quality, to critiquing the research. Researchers and academics tend to

be held up as the experts, and their statements are rarely openly questioned. In New Zealand the Ministry of Education has relied on such expertise to not only develop but also to "sell" the introduction of a national quality assurance system to our very diverse early childhood community. To quote from Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999, p. 92):

... we can see a growing body of experts - researchers, consultants, inspectors, evaluators and so on - whose job it is to define and measure quality. Increasingly, we rely on this expert system to make judgments for us about the services we want or need for ourselves and our children. We look to these experts to tell us that what we are getting is good 'quality'. Increasingly overloaded, we seek reassurance rather than understanding, we want the guarantee of expert assessment.

Research has tended to be framed and conducted in such a way that it links in with public policy needs and concerns for quality control and more recently quality assurance. In short, research and the experts who hold this knowledge have had a tremendous influence on our perception of what quality is, and this in turn is reflected in the dominance of the psychological approach which focuses on measurable indicators and pre-defined outcomes. We will now turn to look at different approaches to quality.

Approaches to Quality

The Dominant Approach

For the past two decades quality has been defined in the literature as positive outcomes for children (Phillips & Howes, 1987). This definition underpins the science of child development approach to the study of quality and is part of the discipline of developmental psychology. Contributions from other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and health have usually been treated as outside of the literature on quality, in other words not relevant in terms of discipline focus and methodology for adding to the knowledge base on quality. Psychology is rooted in the logical positivist tradition that emphasises the experimental approach, quantitative data, and large scale replicable studies. As a science it is believed that the findings are generalisable and therefore that the indicators of quality identified through research are universal. Hence, indicators such as adult-child ratio, group size, and trained staff have internationally become part of our conception of what quality is. This is regardless of the fact that most of the research under this dominant approach was carried out in North America with populations and systems of early childhood care and education that are different from other cultural contexts and countries (Farquhar, 1993).

Findings on the indicators of quality and conditions for providing good-quality have dominated and underpinned policy development and setting at both national and local levels (for example, Duncan, 1997, Elfer & Wedge, 1996). In policy and in practice this has resulted in a focus on what should happen and how this can be achieved- rather than on what does happen and seeking an understanding of why. Probably the chief criticism that can be leveled against this dominant approach is that it is concerned primarily with the generation of knowledge, the production of scientific facts. The findings generated are most useful for informing policy decisions and the implications are usually policy ones. This approach is not concerned with a search for understandings and explanations, nor with how useful the literature is in the eyes of children, parents, and teachers.

The literature has served to provide policy-makers and early childhood service advocates with scientific evidence (or proof) of the importance of certain inputs such as trained staff and structural conditions such as staff stability and group size (Helburn, 1995; Willer, 1990). The focus has been on physical capital (e.g. number of staff) rather than on human capital

(e.g. staff motivation). Today quality and money are commonly considered to go hand in hand, that is, inputs cost money and therefore the maintenance of positive structural conditions are related to the programme's financial status and funding. Yet we know from literature outside of early childhood education that quality can not be brought and that the view of quality as consisting merely of inputs is a very narrow one (Bottery, 1994).

In practice because of its close alignment with policy and focus on the measurement and control of quality, this approach has promoted mediocrity and standardisation. As the Diagram below shows the benefits for early childhood programmes of such an approach tend to be short-term, and long-term the result is greater dependence on the experts and government policy to dictate what should be done to achieve quality.

Additional Approaches in the Literature

Additional approaches to quality in early childhood education include:

1. Group perspectives, the stakeholder approach (Farquhar, 1990; Balaguer, Mestres & Penn, 1992);
2. Meaning making, the post-modernist approach (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999);
3. Organisational culture, an ecological ethnographic approach adapted from business management (Hatherly, 1997; 1999).

The first two approaches have arisen out of a critique of the dominant approach with its emphasis on objectivity, measurement, and certainty. Within the first approach a range of perspectives have been identified and in recent years there has been research into these (for example see Moss & Pence, 1994). The stakeholder approach has provided justification and support for the efforts of ethnic groups and groups subscribing to alternative philosophies of early childhood education. For example, in New Zealand the Maori kohanga reo early childhood service recognised primary aims are cultural rejuvenation and language promotion and it has different government requirements for standards and regulations than other early childhood services (Irwin, 1990). The emergence of the stakeholder approach has led to researchers looking at alternative research techniques and ways of researching for, rather than about, practitioners (McNaughton, 1996; Mooney, Munton, Rowland, & McGurk, 1997). For example, Mooney et al (1997) sought views on quality in daycare from different key groups and then incorporated these diverse views into a conceptual framework. Social learning theory and experiential learning underpinned their design of materials based on the conceptual framework to assist practitioners to assess, and importantly enhance, the quality of their programmes.

The second approach is probably more of a very strong critique of the dominant approach than a fully-developed alternative approach. However the criticisms of the dominant approach made by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) and their ideas and examples of alternatives, such as pedagogical documentation and a focus on process rather than product, go well beyond the boundaries of a stakeholder approach. As an alternative to the discourse of quality, a discourse of meaning making is proposed. To explain very briefly, meaning making is about deepening our understanding of what is going on in early childhood programmes, making judgments about the value of what goes on, and possibly seeking some agreement with others about these judgments.

The third approach has been influenced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory and modern management concern with understanding the culture of the organisation in order to bring about improvements to the way people work and outcomes. When applied to early childhood

settings the approach lends itself to using ethnographic study techniques and starts to address issues of the researcher-participant relationship and the role of research in effecting change in practice and understanding of (Hatherly, 1999).

The first two approaches to quality are now generally well known amongst researchers, whilst the third has yet to catch on. The emergence of these different approaches have created confusion and uncertainty about the definition of quality whereas under the dominant approach quality simply meant indicators that predicted whether a programme was beneficial for children's development. Under the dominant approach the role of research centered on informing and supporting policy and regulation but now the role of research is uncertain (Pence & Moss, 1994). Moving from the dominant approach to other approaches can be difficult for researchers who fear a sharp decline in the quality of programmes if the knowledge built up under the dominant approach is dismissed.

Dimensions of quality in practice

Perhaps we do not need to dismiss the dominant approach, but recognise it for what it is, only one approach that is no more or no less important than other approaches. We could move from using the word quality to focusing specifically on the key dimensions of the construct. The dimensions which are probably most relevant to the context of early childhood education are:

1. Standards (These are **externally** set in the form of national or regional regulations, and they may be specific to programmes within a service such as kindergartens. At the most basic level standard setting, monitoring and evaluating is about quality control, however if the aim is to reduce the incidence of non-compliance in the first place then interest focuses on methods of quality assurance).
2. Organisational excellence (This goes beyond quality assurance to a concern for understanding and a search for strategies for improvement which are meaningful and relevant to individual early childhood programmes. The focus is on **internal** motivation and ownership for change, in other words "total quality").
3. Client benefits (This gives primacy and value to the perspectives of the people or groups of people **most directly** served by individual early childhood programmes. Here the focus is on how practices are perceived by and translate into benefits for children and parents; and also if applicable the particular community or cultural group the programme was established for).

Each dimension is distinct and provides very different ways of looking at quality. To identify a programme that was as good as others we would probably be concerned with whether it meets standards or regulations to the same level as other programmes. To identify a programme that was better in some manner or different than other programmes we would want to know about the culture of the programme, including the beliefs and values of staff and ways of working. To know whether a programme is good for children and parents and suitably served the community it was set up for, rules of thumb would include for example whether each: child relates with/happily engages with staff; child engages happily with peers, parent does not have any worries about their child in the programme, child is happy to go to the programme, parent and staff member is pleased with the level of congruency between home and programme experiences and learning outcomes.

Conclusion

Quality is an over-used word and it has been argued here that it is not a particularly helpful word. Recent confusion over its meaning due to the emergence of new approaches to looking at quality, means that we must either discard the knowledge built up about quality

through substantial research, attempt some kind of reconstruction of the concept of quality, or as proposed in this paper, simply be more specific about what we mean by quality. It has been suggested that in being more specific we need to introduce more precise terminology focused on what we actually mean and are interested in. There are at least three distinct ways of looking at quality, and each of these should be recognised as important and essential in their own right: standards, organisational culture, and client benefits. These are suggestions and debate is welcome.

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